

**THE TEXT IS FLY
WITHIN THE BOOK
ONLY**

H 913-10

Hull
Experiment - 500
Short novels
1002814

H 913-10

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

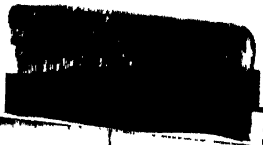
Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



Public Library
Kansas City, Mo.

Keep Your Card in This Pocket



1940

SEP 10 '40

AUG 18 '41

SEP 6 '42

DEC 20 '43

MAY 10 '44

MAR 29 '44

JUL 10 '44

LINCOLN

JAN 25 '45

DEC 8 '44

EXPERIMENT

Books by Helen Hull

HEAT LIGHTNING

HARDY PERENNIAL

MORNING SHOWS THE DAY

UNCOMMON PEOPLE

CANDLE INDOORS

FROST FLOWER

EXPERIMENT



Experiment

FOUR SHORT NOVELS

BY

Helen Hull



COWARD-McCANN, INC.

NEW YORK



COPYRIGHT, 1938, 1939, 1940, BY HELEN HULL

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must
not be reproduced in any form without permission.

Manufactured in the United States of America
Van Rees Press, New York


Acknowledgment

"With the One Coin for Fee" was first published in *Good Housekeeping* under the title "Last September"; "Food for Thought" in *Red-book Magazine*; "Snow in Summer" in *Story Magazine*; and "Experiment" in *Pictorial Review* under the title "Life Experiments."

Contents

WITH THE ONE COIN FOR FEE	3
FOOD FOR THOUGHT	71
SNOW IN SUMMER	123
EXPERIMENT	215

*WITH THE ONE COIN
FOR FEE*



With the One Coin for Fee

Crossing alone the nighted ferry
With the one coin for fee.

*P*ERHAPS TO UNDERSTAND the story, you need to understand the setting. Certainly it contained, in concrete and tangible shape, the forces which worked to produce the beginning of the story. And without this particular setting, there never could have been this ending. Perhaps the extraordinary, sweet, concentrated air which runs under the great dark wings of a hurricane is in part responsible for the ending; at the very heart of darkness and destruction is this breath of concentrated life, burning out too rapidly sluggish blood, toxins of habit and hate and age. It is exhilarating as any great fear may be, it gives a kind of intoxication unlike the ordinary earthly forms in that the feeling of release, of freedom and power, is not an illusion. It may be temporary, but it is real while it lasts. And one good whiff may well make a man believe, as it penetrates to cells which had never breathed before, that the trouble with this world may be that it is keyed down to thin, dull air.

All that is surmise, but the setting itself is real enough. Some changes occurred on that day in late September, but up to that day not much had changed for more than a hundred years. A town in southern New England, touching the coast and stretching inland a few miles; the town itself centered about the river, before it spread out to make the head of the bay, bridges with turntables and draws for the vessels that came up to the docks, with warehouses and

ships' chandlers' shops along the docks, with business streets, a few, at the foot of the hills, and residence streets climbing the hills; with a mill or two, and factories farther inland, along the river banks. North of the town lay farming country, and south of it the widening bay and ocean. Out of the town ran the shore road, and here macadam had replaced the original road where white sand poured from the turning rims of wheels; some of the estates had been cut into building lots for summer cottages; the tip of the western side of the bay was Grady's Amusement Park, with bathing pavilions, a skating rink, a Ferris wheel, and concession stands around the parking place for the cars which had produced this development.

A few miles out from town, where the shore thrust a finger into the bay, so that you had the last of the river on one side, and what seemed to be real ocean on the other, stood the old Lathrop place. The shore drive cuts across the base of the finger, ceasing to be a shore drive for several miles. When the drive was put through, there had been some dickerings through an agent with Mrs. Susan Lathrop Field, the last of the Lathrops, who was abroad at the time, in London, on the Riviera, in Cairo. She had no sentiment against selling the shore land for the drive; on the contrary, she had a desire to make good money (which she no doubt needed!) at the town's expense. Finally the town council overrode the one elderly alderman who still felt that the town owed a great deal to the Lathrop family, and voted to confiscate a right of way in a convenient straight line across the property, behind the barns and stables, and through what had been a small training track old Lathrop had used for his horses. People whizzing past in cars saw only the weathering out-buildings. In the winter the square bulk of the house showed through arching branches of the great elms and oaks, with dark rust stains from hinges of

the closed shutters staining the dingy clapboards, and the two great chimneys, one at each end, standing like patient lifted cars.

Across from the barns and sheds, and in its season, the house, lay the rest of the bisected property, fields and woods, and what had originally been the farmer's house, a sturdy, story-and-a-half building, like those you see in Maine and New Hampshire. It stood on a swelling mound of land, a neat road winding past it to the garage, its paint smooth-white, its opened shutters sleek and green, the meadow tamed into a lawn under its charmingly curtained windows. *They* said that Mrs. Field had had to come down in her price, when there was no shore land left except that around the old ark that no one wanted, and almost no one remembered that Margaret Turner's father had been the farmer on the Lathrop place. For Margaret had bought the little house, and she was there, that fall of nineteen hundred and thirty-eight.

She had spent her summer holidays there even before she bought the house, and although she had never lied outright about the matter, she had somehow created for her occasional guest the impression that these were ancestral acres about her, their original glory damaged by the wanton stroke of the road through them, by the change in the quality of the residents along the western shore of the bay. Margaret had not set about creating this impression. She had said, and it was true, "When my father set out those trees," and, "Once the lawns ran to the very edge of the beach, you can't imagine how beautiful it was then!" and, "It would have broken my father's heart if he had seen what changes—" Her guests, a girl from the private school where Margaret taught mathematics, motoring with her mother to their summer place on the Cape, or two or three of her fellow teachers, skipping about the country in

a polished Ford, stopped on their journey to have tea in Margaret's charming living room, with its English chintzes, hooked rugs, pieces of old mahogany and pine. As they drove away, the girl's mother might say, "You can tell that Miss Turner comes from a good family, I'm glad there's someone like that in your school," and the girl might answer, "Well, I sort of like her, although most of the girls are just paralyzed! She's terribly sarcastic." And the teachers, some of the younger members of the faculty, who had stopped to boast about their trip around the Gaspé, would say, "Of course, if you had a place like that, that had been in your family for generations, you would rather spend your summer that way. She didn't seem the least bit stuck up or cold, did she, when you see her in her own setting?" And when Margaret sighed as she said, "It would cost too much to put the big house in shape, or to run it," she was sighing in all sincerity at a dream of her young girlhood; she didn't intend to suggest a picture of herself as brave and wise, settling into the cottage, earning the money for its shingles and paint and a part-time handyman and gardener, never complaining at lost elegance and leisure.

Probably Margaret Turner never examined too closely the impression she had established about herself and the old Lathrop place. It mattered little to anyone except herself, and for herself it was like a warm, dark cloak within the folds of which she could hide the emptiness of her hands or her heart, a cloak drawn around a self not quite symmetrical nor firmly fleshed, a trifle warped and withered from meager fare, from thwartings and overstrain. She hadn't planned to weave a complete garment, she had just sketched a line or two of it, she wasn't entirely to blame if in mild gossip, casual references, people clothed her thus.

Among the items which no one except Margaret knew

were these: she had spent every cent of her savings (they weren't much, on her small salary) including her one insurance policy which had matured when she was sixty, in buying the house and furnishing it; there was still a small mortgage, which she meant to pay off before she retired. She understood vaguely that the school at which she taught did something for its teachers when they were too old to be of further use. Surely enough to live on—taxes, coal, a little food. But after 1929 there had been uneasiness among the older teachers. The endowment of the school was small, the contributions from alumnae diminished (married women couldn't expect their husbands to do much for their wives' old school, not with the market the way it was!) and in the need to reduce expenses, there began a weeding out among the older members of the staff. Margaret Turner held her wiry figure more erect, had her white hair waved more often, tried a little rouge under her handsome dark eyes, and moved with an effect of great vivacity about her work. "You have your own home," some of them said to her, "you don't have to worry. Did you hear about poor old Simmsy? The trustees cut her pension in half the other day, they don't know how long they can continue that pittance, Simmsy isn't seventy yet and she says all her folks live to be ninety at least."

The trustees were sorry, but there was nothing in the bond about pensions. In prosperous times they could make generous gestures, but after all, women of intelligence, on regular salaries all those years, should have some foresight about the future, and since retrenchment was necessary, it was only fair to keep the younger teachers at work. There had been a dinner last May, a dinner of farewell to two women who had been longest with the school. They weren't older than Margaret, but their age was on the record because they had started early, and had been less

canny than Margaret. They'd let themselves go a little, too, Margaret thought, as she sat at the dinner listening to pleasant speeches from old girls about how much these women had meant to them. Earmarked as elderly, too comfortable about figure and dress. If she was careful, she might fool them into keeping her on for a few more years. After the dinner, in the teachers' cloak room, one of them, puffing as she bent to pull on her galoshes, said: "You know, horses have a better deal. They shoot 'em when they're through with 'em." The other, who was plump and pink and whose good humor was not yet entirely deflated by the sharp pricking point of fear, said, "There's one thing sure, we'll have good company at the poorhouse. All the best people will be there!"

"Haven't you relatives?" Margaret had asked. "You used to talk about your sister's children—"

"Distant relatives." She chuckled. "That's a good phrase. Very distant. You know, in hard times there's nothing so distant as a relative. Self-protection, in case you wanted something. Don't be funny. No, the only useful relatives are the kind you have, nice ones who've passed on and left you well fixed."

She'd like to visit me this summer, thought Margaret; she saw the notion in the change it made as it crossed the woman's mind. Nothing so harsh as calculation, more a quick child-wish, as if she pressed her face, eyes round, mouth pursed a little, close to a windowpane beyond which was something longed for. I couldn't, thought Margaret; I couldn't stand having anyone around all the time, I don't really know her, anyway I couldn't afford it, I've got to be careful. "Drop in, if you're in my neighborhood." That was it, turn away quickly, you haven't seen the entreaty. "I'd be delighted to give you a cup of tea."

"Well, I don't know just where—" The porter had

knocked on the door then. Mrs. Montagu, one of the old girls, was waiting; she had her car, she'd be glad to drive them home, it was raining. Margaret had bade them good night, good-by, she wasn't quite ready to go. She wasn't ready to be one of the elderly, discarded figures, with Mrs. Montagu, no doubt, feeling a pleasant glow at her thoughtful kindness to them.

The first of June, Margaret had packed her trunk, and filled a box with books and pictures, emptying the room in the residence hotel for women of every sign of her tenancy. Usually she stored the box in the basement until fall, but this year she sent it by express to her house at the shore. No one noticed; there was a new management, and the chipper desk clerk didn't realize that Miss Turner had lived in the hotel since it opened. He didn't even ask if she wished the same room in the fall. At least, thought Margaret, she wouldn't regret leaving; the building had run down. And she didn't have to explain that she meant to look for a cheaper room, one where she could prepare her own breakfast, and perhaps supper. The lunches served at the school were really dinners. If she could save a little more, if she could count on two more years—if only they didn't pare the salaries another ten per cent—

She spent June setting her house in order, waxing each piece of furniture, watching the warm color, the subtle texture of wood shine out as the bluish film of wax disappeared under her slow patient rubbing, polishing the silver, cleaning the rugs. She no longer did much with gardens, except for weeding around the few perennials. When she stooped over, black spots moved crazily across her eyes, and the hollows in her temples throbbed. For a few years after she bought the place, she had hired a man to help her, but fifty cents an hour was much more than she needed for her own living. She had a boy from the

village come once a week to cut the grass, and on pleasant days she attacked with clippers the tufts he had left along the edge of the walk and drive, around the trees, close to the granite blocks that made the foundation of the house. In the long June evenings she crossed the highway, looking carefully in each direction to make sure no car was about to rush at her, with young voices shrieking or horns screaming; she walked past the old Lathrop house, looking up at the discolored shutters, she looked under the pines for lilies of the valley, she had picked them there when she was a child, they still grew, small sheaths of green enclosing the staff of tiny, cream bells. She kicked her toe against the unkempt grass which thrust itself through the old graveled path, she frowned at the lilac bushes with the straggle of dead branches at the center, with a few brownish spikes among the heart-shaped leaves where blossoms had grown neglected in May. It just shows, she said. It just shows! They had everything to start with, everything, and I had nothing. Now Susan Lathrop is a ruined old woman with no one to say a good word for her, and I—her face set in bleak pride—no one has ever had a word to breathe against me. No hint of the slightest scandal. Although it wasn't easy, always—

The grounds in front of the house looked green in the soft twilight, with the pointed blades of June grass, but as she crossed them, her feet sank into the matted grayish tangle of old, uncut growth. As Margaret went toward the shore she thought, I'd like to see Susan Lathrop face to face, I'd like to ask her—I'd say, how could you do this to yourself, how could you fall so far? Look at the two of us now, think what you had then, money, beauty, position, safety, love, oh, most of all, love! Because of you my brother ran away, and died. He was going to make a fortune for you in the copper mines, you couldn't wait! And

Lester Field had begun to love me, when you came home that summer. I was nobody, and you—you were Susan Lathrop. And now, people respect me! But they snicker when they speak your name.

Sometime, surely, they would meet, and Margaret would speak out. She could scarcely have bought her house for this one purpose, she could not have said why she had such satisfaction in the small perfection of her own place and the steady disintegration of the large house and its grounds, but as she thought of Susan she drew in her full upper lip so that her mouth was thin and hard, and her eyes, under the deep arched lids, were black-brown, pupil and iris merged in hatred. When she reached the edge of the land, she would shake herself, thrusting her hands into the pockets of the leather jacket she wore against the evening air, she would say, why do I bother with thoughts of her, here's this nice sea air to breathe, and even a little sunset left. Sometimes she sat on the rickety steps of the old bath-house, watching the flat sand run with opalescence as the tide came slowly, spreading the curving edge of thin advancing water, withdrawing it, in rhythm which seemed so hesitant that she was astonished when at last there was water at her feet. The tide eddied in lines of color about the irregular dark piles which marked the line of the long pier; the pier itself had cracked up in winter ice, had been carried away piece by piece. Beyond the tip of land the water of the outer bay was already darker, its movement shaking off the reflection of lingering sunset color. Sometimes Margaret walked through the stiff grass to the outer shore, but not often; the rocks there scuffed her shoes, the air was colder, and well down the bay the lights of the amusement park twinkled crazily, like a dissipated, earth-bound constellation. Always when she turned away from the water she was surprised to find the land so dark, eve-

ning already caught around the old house, under the trees. She would walk more quickly, feeling dew from the long grass on her ankles, looking to right and left before she crossed the highway, and sometimes as she waited, while a car roared past, the glare of the headlights briefly on the great barn, on a bit of broken paddock fence, she could see, before the thicker darkness settled again, her brother standing there, his hand on the shining neck of a restless mare, and beside him Susan Lathrop, her figure like an hour-glass in the dark riding habit of the early nineties, her reddish gold hair curling under the stiff brim of her hat, her face vivid with laughter. She was more alive than anyone I ever knew, thought Margaret. Now she's a raddled old woman. They say she dyes her hair and paints her face. After all, I don't want to see her. It's been years—

But in July, when Margaret just missed seeing her, she was conscious for days of her disappointment. It gnawed at her when she woke up at night, when she lay waiting for seven o'clock to come, so that she had a reason for getting up. If only she hadn't been pampering herself, if she had gone in to the village shopping, if she had been working around the place, instead of staying in bed! She had caught cold, it had rained so many days in July that she had grown careless about keeping her feet dry, she had felt feverish, she had put herself to bed in a small panic. She couldn't afford to be sick, she had to keep herself well, she had to go back to school in the fall. She had, from her ground-floor rear bedroom, not heard any car drive along the grass-grown gravel road to the Lathrop house. When her own doorbell had rung, she had lain very still, waiting for whoever it was to go away. The next day the boy came to cut the grass; the steady rains made it grow almost faster than he could run the lawn mower. She listened to him for a while, following him about the familiar ground

by the variations in the noise he made. When he reached the final square of grass behind the house, she got up, feeling exactly like an old dishrag; she meant to dress, but the labor seemed stupendous. She guessed it wouldn't hurt the boy to see her in a bathrobe, not after some of the sights he saw at Grady's beach. But she took off the net she had tied over her hair, and combed the waves carefully into place. Even her hair looked sick, limp, flattened to her small head. She made herself tea and toast, she wrote a list of supplies for the chain grocery store in the village, they wouldn't deliver unless she ordered two dollars worth, but perhaps Sam could bring the things out for her. Then, with her purse, she went to the kitchen door as Sam ran the lawn mower into the shed.

"I thought I better cut it today," he said, "looks like more rain." Sure, he'd bring out the groceries, he was going to the rink tonight anyways. Then he added, "Too bad you wasn't home yesterday. You sure missed a treat." He put the list in the pocket of his blue shirt, and slid the four quarters into a trouser pocket. "I was at the garage when she came back, see? They stopped for gas."

"Who did?" (I'm glad I didn't answer that doorbell, it must have been one of the girls from the school.)

"Old Mrs. Field, you know, the one used to live out here. She asked Bill did he know where you were, and he said he guessed you were home, you always was. She said you must be dead if you was here, not to hear her ring. She's kinda deaf, you have to holler at her, or mebbe it's her earrings, they're big as a traffic light. 'Who's living in the farmhouse?' she said, 'and where are they?' Bill said Miss Turner, and I guess she's home. She said, 'Turner? Turner? I've heard that name somewhere.' She was sitting up front with the chauffeur, he was a dark looking fellow, like a dago—"

"Is that all she said? What did she want?"

"The chauffeur said, we can't hang around here any longer, and he let the clutch in so hard the old dame bounced back with her hat over one eye. Honest, Miss Turner, you oughta see her! Dolled up like a mo'om picture star."

"What did she want of me?" Margaret's throat was dry.

"Gee, I don't know. Bill says just as well you wasn't home, you wouldn't want any truck with that piece of goods." The boy was grinning a little, his sandy, immature face touched with slyness, at the recollection of some male ribaldry he wouldn't repeat. Margaret could see it, in the way he glanced at her under his lids, in the way he rubbed a finger against a spot on his chin. She couldn't say go on, tell me every word he said, for all she was parched with thirst for more than this sip of news. She nodded, her eagerness burning in her cheeks, her silence coaxed the boy. "It wasn't even the same fellow she had last time she stopped here. Bill said he was a light-complected fellow, and anyway his picture was in the papers, you know, when his wife chased 'em across the country and was going to shoot him, only Mrs. Field gave her about twenty grand and she divorced him instead. Bill says boy friends come kinda high at her age, and what's she going to do when her money gives out?"

(You shouldn't stand here gossiping with a village boy! It's horrid, undignified.) Margaret could hear the rebuke faintly, as if her usual decent self, the one she offered to public view, had withdrawn almost beyond inner earshot. And then, at the queer smirk the boy's face wore, she had a quick revulsion, a protest of her sex against the bawdiness at which she could only guess that must have shouted in Bill's actual remarks.

"She has to have a chauffeur," she said, crisply. "You don't know—"

"Huh, if you'd heard the way he spoke to her!" But Sam could take a hint, if Miss Turner didn't want any more it was okey with him. He stood away from the door against which he had lounged, he said, "I'll leave the groceries when I come by after supper, you send word by the postman if you want me before next week." Then he had gone.

Margaret sat down at the table in her quiet kitchen. She poured a cup of tea, but it had grown luke-warm, and she could not anywhere find energy to rise, to light the gas under the kettle. Painted, bedizened Jezebel, she thought. The village loafers making lewd sport of her. Well, Bill and Sam weren't exactly loafers, but the idea was the same. She thought she'd heard the name Turner! Why, she must have lost her mind. Perhaps that was the explanation. How could she have forgotten— Anger tightened in Margaret. Perhaps Susan Lathrop had never known we had a family name! An anger of her childhood, bitter, seeming when she first knew it entirely futile, and yet serving as a drive through the hard years as she had struggled upward. "It does you no good to kick against the station in life you're born to," her father used to say to her. "Even the prayer book tells you that!" Well, she was Miss Turner now to the village, and Susan Lathrop had turned into *that piece of goods*. For all Margaret's father had been Rob, never Mr. Turner, and her brother had been Bobby as he grew old enough to help his father with the gardens and horses, and she herself had been Maggie, loathing the name. The village men spoke of her with respect, she wouldn't want any truck with that piece of goods. And Susan, bright, beautiful, vivid Susan— Margaret pushed her hair away from her forehead, she sat very straight in the wooden

chair. Susan Lathrop hadn't lost her mind, she'd lost her character.

Had she thought, because she moved so much about the earth, never staying long in any place, never in any way settling down, that rumors of her affairs would never reach as far as her home town? Or hadn't she cared, the headstrong, willful pride of the young Susan changed into the base alloy of arrogance and indifference? But there was no safety in distance any more, there was no distance any more. Any criminal must have a harder time now, thought Margaret. Why, when I was a girl, Boston seemed a long journey from here, or New York, people went there and the miles between were a cloak behind which they could hide. No one knew you. Rumor went on foot then, now it leaps at the turn of a dial, it shouts from the front page of a tabloid almost before the deed shouted has taken place. Margaret had saved the papers—more than a year ago, it was—although she meant to burn them. Deserted wife pursues mate across country, charges alienation of affection, says Mrs. Susan Lathrop Field made gifts of jewelry and money to handsome young Bullett, tempted him. Pictures of Susan, of Bullett, of deserted wife, of tiny tots weeping for father to come home. "She lured him by luxury," says wife, "until he was no longer content with our humble home." Pictures of Mrs. Field's villa at Cannes, of her twenty-two-room cottage at Bar Harbor. And later, picture of injured wife, handkerchief to her eyes, check in her hand. Fifty-thousand-dollar balm, said the headline. "Money does not replace him, but I must think of my kiddies," says wife. Twenty thousand, they said in the village. Whatever it was, before the end of the summer the village had the end of that story. George Carter, who ran the village barber shop, and his wife Ella, who had the beauty parlor in the room back of the barber shop, took a

two weeks' vacation touring the East; George wanted to borrow his brother's trailer, but Ella said no, she wanted a real vacation, and they had stopped at over-night camps all the way to Canada and back. Since George's father and his grandfather before him had worked in the Lathrop factory, where Susan's money came from, it was only natural for the Carters to make Bar Harbor one of their stops. They drove past the twenty-two-room cottage, and Ella asked which was the most exclusive beauty shop, and went there for a manicure. She felt she owed it to her customers to pick up what hints about the trade she could. She didn't have her hair done, as they wouldn't give her a trade discount, even when she showed them one of her printed cards. But a manicure gives a better chance for looking around and talking. As soon as the operator found out she was from Eastbourne, she opened right up. (Ella herself had opened up as she set the wave in Margaret's hair.) Susan Field was one of their steady customers. Facials, mud-packs, henna rinses, everything! And next to her Maker, if Miss Turner would pardon Ella for speaking right out, who knew more about a woman than the operators in her beauty parlor? Ella always said maybe the Lord made them, but she knew who made them over. And from what the Bar Harbor girl said, there wasn't much left of the original job on Susan Lathrop Field.

As soon as I'm over this cold, thought Margaret, suddenly, I must make an appointment with Ella Carter. I ought to get my hair back in shape before school begins, I put too much blueing in when I wash it myself. She didn't finish her thought, that Ella might have heard something, or George, something more than the boy Sam had reported. Instead, her mouth a thin, scornful line, she turned over in her mind fragments of the story Ella had repeated. Susan, waiting an hour or more in the beauty parlor, peering up

and down the busy resort street, nowhere among the tourists' dusty cars, the varnished station wagons with Maine license plates, the gay sport cars, nowhere Susan's imported town car, nowhere the handsome Bullett. He'd come when he got ready, he'd been dating up the cashier at the drug store, or a waitress at the café. He never kept them waiting in the evening! When he did come, finally, Susan never bawled him out a bit: she'd just say, oh, I got finished early, or did I make a mistake again, I meant to say twelve o'clock, and he'd grin out of one corner of his mouth. A terrible picture, of a woman terrified, jealous, helpless. You couldn't help liking her, the girl had said, for all she acted like an old fool. They hadn't heard about Bullett's wife until Ella told them, they thought that explained a good deal. Then toward the end of the summer, just a year ago, Bullett went off with a woman, someone who had a sports-wear shop in Bar Harbor in the summer, in Palm Beach winters. He went in a new coupe Susan had bought him, and she set the police after him. But then Susan collapsed, two nurses, doctors, and she must have called off the police, for no one heard another word.

"George's father always said old Mr. Lathrop was a prince," Ella had finished. "It seems kinda too bad, doesn't it, when you think of the advantages she had and all? George says her father would turn over in his grave. What I tell George is I can't understand any woman not getting her fill of men before she gets to that age! Why, the Bar Harbor operator told me—" then Ella had stopped, with a clicking of her tongue, and Margaret understood that her own condition of refined spinsterhood made it impossible for Ella to tell her all she had heard, even when the part withheld might well be the most—well, say, revealing. Margaret had failed to find a phrase which would, with dignity and decorum, release Ella's tongue. So she had

merely said, "Too bad? It's horrible. You read about such things, but you don't believe them. But to hear them about a woman you knew— No, I refuse to try to understand it."

Margaret's head ached, with her rehearsal of Ella's story, with the way her thoughts, like a flock of starlings, rushed at the news Sam had brought, scattered in a rush at some impulse of her will. Why should she care so much what Susan Field did? What if she had another—what had Sam called them—another boy-friend? Grotesque and fascinating. And none of your business, she told herself, getting to her feet. Only what had Susan wanted of her, why had she rung her bell?

The rain had started again, making a small pricking noise against the windowpanes. Margaret thought, I'll catch more cold sitting here in the damp, I must go back to bed. She moved softly, not to jar her head, and shivered as she stretched herself flat and drew a blanket up to her chin. If ever the sun came out again, she ought to air everything in the house. For a few moments she kept her mind busy hanging out blankets, emptying closets, even the cedar closet in the attic where she stored her winter clothes. You had to watch out for mildew. Then Susan came back, quite as if she brushed down all the dangling garments and confronted Margaret. Only Margaret couldn't see her clearly. The pictures in the tabloids had been chiefly hat and summer fur, a great collar of white fox. Not a trace of the Susan Margaret had known. When she tried to construct an image out of what she had heard, she got the face of Edna May Oliver. That was Sam's remark, dolled up like a mo'om pitcher star. Margaret had a picture of her, a stiff cardboard photograph, huge puffed sleeves, lace collar wired up under the ears, round eyes staring with innocence under a frontispiece of frizzed bangs. It was in the tray of the Saratoga trunk, in the

small package of letters, receipts, account book, which had been sent home from Colorado when Robert died. I'd like to show it to her, thought Margaret, fiercely. I'd like to say, Look what you've done to yourself! Perhaps it was as well no one had answered when Susan rang. Too much might have been said.

The gray and rain-drenched twilight deepened until the pattern of the flowered wall paper was lost, until the silver-backed brushes (a gift from a senior class two years ago) ranged on the pine chest had no reflection in the mirror above them, and the landscape painted at the top of the mirror blurred into the rest of the grayness. It was the same room where Margaret had slept as a child, with Robert in the room next, and her father and mother in the front room, which she had made over into her study. The darkness dissolved the pleasant changes she had made, she might have been lying in the narrow iron bed, the painted white commode in the corner, matting tacked over the floor. As a child, excited because Susan Lathrop was coming home from the Select School for Young Ladies, and Margaret, in a clean apron, her face scrubbed, her hair slicked back in two pigtails, could play croquet with her, could follow her about, somewhat dazzled at her bright daring. I'm not sure it's good for Maggie, she could remember her mother saying. She gets all stirred up, she may get notions— And her father, Maggie's got sense enough to know she can't have the things nor do the things Lathrop's daughter can. Even then Susan wanted Robert to play with them—and then Robert wouldn't play with girls. Later, excited again because Susan was coming home, but a different Susan when she came, her skirts long, her lovely hair tucked up at the back of her head, a Susan who didn't want to play with girls now, who wanted Robert to ride with her, who wanted Lester Field! And Margaret

had lain sleepless, her young body pressed against the thin mattress so hard the springs of the old iron bed made little ping-sounds all night, her mouth muffled against the pillow. And now Susan had come home again, if only for a moment, and Margaret lay sleepless. What was it like, at Susan's age, not to be done with—ah, you couldn't call it love!

I must be feverish. Margaret sat up indignantly, snapped on the light on the night table, shook two tablets from the aspirin bottle, swallowed them with a sip of water, looked about her room, at the prints on the walls, at the ruffled organdy curtains, at every sign of dignified accomplishment which would fix her in the present. She left the light burning, turning her face away from it, and presently slept. When she woke, the lamp was pale in morning light, and she knew she had been dreaming. Bits of the dreams stayed a moment, drifting on the waves of waking before they were submerged and lost, Susan running ahead of her over the rocky shore, laughing at something, Margaret hurrying after her, slipping, falling, and Robert's voice, or was it her father's? Then they were gone. Margaret snapped off the light. She couldn't remember any more of the dream. She could see the sky through the curtains, mother-of-pearl and lustrous, the rain had ended, she felt better. It was queer, how in dreams you never were any age, young, or middle-aged, or old, you were just you, all of you at once, some secret essence of you. Perhaps that was the way you ought to be, awake, only some foolish notion about time and years lived got in between you and yourself; or your waking memory was weak, holding today as the only real thing, while all of you was really there, continuous, and in dreams the whole you pressed through the barriers. But her thought was almost part of the dream,

and as she woke fully, sank with the dream under the surface of her waking.

The next few days the sun shone coppery in a glazed sky, the breeze was feather-light and southerly, there seemed no air to breathe, just the warm mist which rose from the drenched earth. Margaret tried sunning her blankets, and found them at the end of the day so damp she could not fold them away. Her shoes, ranged neatly in shoe-rails on her closet door, had a patina of mildew on heels and soles. There was through the house the faint musty smell of fibers playing host to invisible and multiplying fungi, wood, plaster, rugs, everything. Even the books had a taint of this odor, and their covers bulged as if someone had left them in the grass all night. If it's like this in the tropics, thought Margaret, I'm glad I never went there. She felt a little as if her bones were mildewed, she couldn't throw off a heaviness of body or of spirit which her cold had left, she fretted against the weather as if it were a private enemy using unfair weapons like poison gas against her and her possessions. If it's this bad in my house, with everything open to what air there is, she thought, what must it be in the big house, all sealed shut. Someone ought to go in, to see what's happening. There had been elegant things in that house, Margaret remembered the red velvet portieres of the drawing room, the gold chairs with red velvet cushions, the crystal chandelier. She might write to Susan. Dear Susan, Perhaps you don't realize this is the worst summer we've ever had at the shore, no one ever saw anything like it, I don't know of course what you've left in your house, but it will certainly be ruined— Write her and be laughed at for her trouble. Susan was old enough to look out for her own things. But she never had looked out for things. Careless, generous. Well, she never had to work for anything, why shouldn't

she be careless and generous? Leaving her toys anywhere, tearing her dresses, giving away anything— Margaret had forgotten—

That little gold necklace, like a fine rope, with the locket, its blue enameled flower and a pearl for its center; Margaret had loved it. Susan had let her wear it one day, had said, keep it, you can have it. Margaret's mother had sent her scampering back with it, crying, her hand clutched over the locket as she climbed the steps to the kitchen door. "They'd think you stole it, a valuable piece of jewelry like that! I don't care if Susan did give it to you, she shouldn't have. Hurry up!" The cook had been cross. Miss Susan was having her bath, the cook was busy with dinner, hadn't Maggie been playing with Miss Susan all day, this was no time to be bothering people. Margaret had marched home, she could keep the necklace over night, she could wear it under her nightgown, she couldn't see Susan before morning. But her mother had taken it off, it had caught in her hair and tweaked it cruelly; she had wrapped it in a bit of paper and sent Father straight off with it. "If they should think you took it! They'd never let you play with her again, they might not want us to stay here! You ought to know better, in our position." She had fairly flown at Father when he came back. "Well?" And Father, "I saw Lathrop, he just laughed and said that girl of his would give her head away if it wasn't riveted on." Susan had said she didn't see why Maggie's mother made such a fuss, but she'd give it back at Christmas. Only she had forgotten, by Christmas she was gone, just where that year Margaret didn't recall. You'll learn, Margaret's mother had said, that it isn't enough to know you are honest and right yourself, you have to see to it that what you do looks that way to everyone else. You can't be too careful. Advice, Margaret knew now, wrung from a stem that pricked

with poverty and hard work and insecurity. Not that there could have been any real threat that Rob Turner would lose his job; always Lathrop's projects, and he had new ones steadily, included Rob, no matter how far they reached into the future. But Mary Turner, Margaret's mother, had gone out to service when she was not yet thirteen, because her own mother had died, and her father, drawn as a vague, good-natured, shiftless figure in the few comments Margaret had ever heard, had taken one way of incompetents, and run away from the problem of his family. Mary Turner had learned early that providence was not to be trusted, and the rest of her life she forestalled any tricks it might play by anticipating the worst. A hard worker, and a harder worrier, Rob Turner used to say. Well, Margaret had remembered her advice; she had been careful, and Susan hadn't.

It was queer the way things kept coming back. Perhaps because she hadn't energy enough to stir around filling her hours with small tasks which took the place of thought. She read the Boston paper every day, walking slowly to the postbox for it after the mail truck passed. But China and Spain were shadows into which her imagination did not venture, and labor troubles were men who didn't have sense enough to stick to jobs when they had them, she might almost have been reading news about another planet, not the one on which she lived. In a way, she was, for all the portents of change had to do with a future world which could not trouble her for long. What she read had less substance than what she remembered. Perhaps the fact that Susan had rung her doorbell and gone away, her errand unexplained, perhaps that ringing of the bell had set in vibration, had waked echoes of Susan. If only I could get in town, thought Margaret, and see Ella; she might have heard more than Sam had reported. While this spell of

weather lasted, she couldn't risk it, waiting at the roadside for a crowded bus, sitting in Ella's back room with the saturated air weighted still more with scented lotions. She could see her name in the list of heat prostrations.

At the end of the week, at the end of a day which seemed worse than the preceding days, intolerable because it was another of the same kind, the wind changed. Margaret was sitting in a canvas chair on the terrace at the side of her house, head back against the gay green and yellow stripes, eyes closed, hands listless. She had been thinking, I ought to go in and get some supper, I can't lie here forever. She heard the wind before she felt it, heard it in the treetops between her and the distant shore. She listened, it was almost like rain, the little swishing noise of leaves turning quickly against each other. She opened her eyes, the treetops, maples and oaks, were in motion, clouds had gathered behind them, the setting sun glinted through clouds, catching the pale under side of leaves as the wind ruffled them. Then she could smell it, an east wind strong with the odor of the salty water, the flats over which it blew. A change of wind, coming in with the tide. She sniffed it eagerly, she stood up to let it blow her thin silk skirt about her. It meant rain, but cooler weather, too. She might walk to the shore, it would be good to see something besides the flat, glassy sea of the past week. Ordinarily she disliked being blown upon, but this evening she stretched into the wind, she walked more springily into it, her usual crisp, rather prim step lengthening. There was no surf as yet, even on the rocky outer shore of the point; the surface of the bay was in motion, long ripples across its gray, and the tide spoke in hurried splashes about the rocks, its usual rhythm of withdrawal and approach lost in the wind's drive. Margaret watched, and as the first large drops of rain fell startling and cold

on her head and face, she turned back. She had to run for her house, past the dark sealed Lathrop house, under the uneasy trees, and as she ran, Susan was running beside her, her flying bright hair darkening as the rain drenched them both. Margaret reached her door, stopped, leaning against it until her heart stopped its thumping; when had she and Susan run through the rain? Susan, with something in her arms, drabbled, dirty-white, blood-smeared, held firmly against Susan's white dress, a nondescript little dog, its side torn, one leg dangling limp. It tried feebly to lick its side, Susan panted, "I can't run any more, I jiggle it too much." Margaret had seen it first, cowering under a rock in the corner of the field, just the briefest glance had shown her its terrified and pain-glazed eyes, she had looked away, hastily, wanting not to see it, not to have to know what it was, and called out to Susan, "I'll race you to the road." But Susan had seen it, had flung herself down beside it, dropping the rope of daisies and sweet clover the two of them had braided, had made soft, compassionate noises in her throat, stretching her hands out slowly, and the dog's lip had curled back from its teeth. "Leave it alone, Susan! He'll bite you! He's dreadful, you mustn't touch him!" Susan had not even heard her, after a moment she had one hand on his head, smoothing the dirty skin over the patient, rounded skull, and then she was hoisting herself to her feet, the animal clasped against her body. "He's been hurt," she said, in a whisper, as if she didn't want the dog to hear. "Oh, let's hurry! Your father will know what to do, Maggie." Then the rain, the threat of which had started them homeward, had begun to fall, and they had run, Margaret gulping the bitter lump of shame she would not admit, telling herself, I didn't know it was hurt, not really, anyway it isn't safe, he might bite, look at her pretty dress— Susan had

never said once, didn't you see him lying there? Margaret's father had dressed the wound, had put a splint on the leg. "He must of had a fight, dogs, or maybe a bobcat." Presently he was hobbling after Susan, his long cur tail flailing the air. He wouldn't come near Margaret, he rolled his yellowish hound-dog eyes, showing the whites, when he saw her. It was too much as if he said, if Susan knew what I know, she wouldn't think much of you! After Susan had left that fall, the dog had disappeared. "He had the makings of a good hunting dog," said Margaret's father, "but he had a roving foot."

Margaret hadn't thought of that dog for years, it couldn't be guilt now which felt so dry in her throat, she'd just lost her breath, running. She didn't worry now what Susan Lathrop Field thought of her! She must take off her dress, lucky she'd had on this old wash-silk. She could light a small fire in the fireplace, it would be pleasant with the rain outside.

When, at the end of the next week, Margaret rode in to the village on the bus, she found George Carter's assistant in charge of the barber shop, and the door to Ella's beauty parlor closed, with a sign, "Back in two weeks." "They just jumped in the car the minute they saw the sun," explained the strange young man.

"I should think Ella might have let her customers know." Margaret was resentful. "Here I came way in on purpose—"

"She talked some of putting in a girl while she was gone, but she said she just lost money when she did, you ladies wouldn't have anyone but her. Now with men it's different, a shave's a shave and you gotta have it when you gotta have it." He bulged comfortably under his white cotton jacket, but his enjoyment of his own comment did not soften Margaret's little scowl of disappointment.

"They've gone to see her folks," he added. "Her mother's poorly, that's one reason she was in a hustle to get away."

Then Ella would have no news when she came back. Margaret edged away from the door; she oughtn't to be standing looking into a men's barber shop. The young fellow didn't look after her as she went along the street, stepping precisely in her carefully whitened canvas oxfords, the bright sun bringing out a faint odor of cleaning fluid from the white front of her figured blue silk dress. Two hours until a bus left for Grady's Amusement Park, the bus which ran past her door. She prolonged her few errands, crossing off each item from her list as she bought it, a spool of darning cotton, toilet soap (she was firm with herself about that, she liked good soap, scented, Yardley's or Houbigant's, she mustn't be extravagant, after all she'd practically wasted her bus fare today). The drugstore clerk said, "Nice to see the sun again," and she agreed. In the grocery store she removed her white cotton gloves to pinch the lettuce heads, the clerk said, "Nice to see the sun again," and she agreed, selecting the firmest head.

There were so many strangers in town in the summer, she really didn't know anyone in the village now. When she'd gone away to college, those long years of hard work, teaching in a country school, a year at a normal, another year of teaching, steady up-climb, she'd lost touch with people here. All her friends now were in the city, she told herself, why should this feeling, like a vague homesickness, pull at her eyelids, at the corners of her mouth? Just because she had to wait for the bus, feeling sorry for herself that there was nowhere in the village a door where she might present herself, where someone would say, "Why, Margaret Turner, come in! How are you? How nice to see you!" Some of the girls she had known in

school had married and settled here, she wouldn't know them if she met them, grandmothers now, or dead, some of them. There weren't any of them I cared about, she thought; they were all dull—after Susan. And my life was different, I made it different. She straightened her shoulders, she thanked the clerk for the neat heavy paper bag with string handles into which she could drop all her small purchases. When he said, "I suppose you won't be here much longer, Miss Turner? You'll be getting back to the city?" she almost thanked him again, he had in a phrase restored her.

"I'll be here the rest of August, at least," she said. "I'm not sure just when I have to leave. September's such a lovely month at the shore."

He waited politely for her to finish, ignoring for the moment the Italian woman, her uncovered dark hair in a loose knot in the plump ridge of her neck, who was shaking a banana at him and saying how mucha, how mucha; he was a nice young man, thought Margaret, as she stepped crisply out of the store.

She walked to the garage, to leave word for Sam. Tomorrow was his regular day, he might have come anyway, but leaving word was one more errand. Bill, in boots and rubber apron, had a car on the washing stand. He held the hose away from Margaret, touched his green eye shade with wet fingers. "You don't want a taxi yet, Miss Turner?"

"Not just yet." Bill made it sound like a friendly joke; he drove her to the station with her trunk and bags, when she left in the fall, he drove her home again in the spring, but he always mentioned the taxi, quite as if she might recklessly order one out at any time. She explained about Sam, and Bill thought he'd probably see the kid, he hung around a lot.

She could see the mouth of the river through the rear door of the garage, with a coal barge drawn up along the dock. "Nice to see the sun again," said Bill, as she walked away. She thought of Susan's shining car standing near the red gasoline pump, and Bill beside it, his shrewd, homely, grimy face puckered with that expression she had seen in Sam's eyes. If Susan didn't know how they—yes, leer was the word for it!—how they all leered at her very name, it was high time someone told her.

Still an hour to wait before the bus came. Margaret went slowly along the narrow street which edged the river, the old docks and piers on one side, a row of one-story wooden buildings on the other, half of them closed, tattered advertisements of beer or tobacco tacked on the boards nailed over the old windows. When she was a child, this was the busiest street in town, with saloons, The Sailors' Snug Harbor, The Oasis, with lunch places, shops smelling of tarred rope and metal; no nice girl ever walked down it alone, even to look at the lumber schooners, the fishing sloops, which lay along the wharves, the girls who did walk there didn't go to look at the ships. Behind one dusty window was a pile of slickers, straddled by a pair of black fisherman's boots, farther along a sign above a door said BEER, but for the most part the street was abandoned, as were the docks. Almost, thought Margaret, as if the sea had retired from business. Motor vans boomed along highways with the freight now, the sons and grandsons of the sailors and fishermen worked in the factories back from the waterfront, or didn't work on W.P.A. projects. She walked, placing her white shoes with caution on worn planks, out to the end of the longest pier, the one from which the excursion steamer used to run. When they'd opened Grady's Amusement Park, they had painted the

little steamer shining white, and advertised moonlight sails to the Park. But who wanted a slow boat, a crowd of people? Margaret had heard stories of what went on in the cars parked along the beaches. She looked at the ticket office, the locked turnstile, the blank window, and then seated herself on the wooden bench.

Her father had taken them on a Sunday excursion once; she must have been very young, for she could remember her brother Robby in a round straw hat and a sailor collar. She had been seasick, she could smell now the dust-stuffy, prickly smell of the green plush on the seat in the ladies' cabin where she had lain miserably, her mother sitting beside her. Why, that was the real reason—She stared at the water, dark, an oily iridescence in the eddies it made around the end piles of the pier— That time Lester Field had asked her to go—if she had gone, her whole life would have been different. She couldn't exactly see his face, not as he had been then; superimposed upon the young face was the face of the older Lester as she had seen him just once, twenty years later, a face of heavy whitish flesh, like wax, with irresolute mouth and dull eyes, the underlids sagging. He had been killed hunting, that fall. Drunk, they said. Well, he married Susan for her money and she gave him a run for it. The village talked thus about Susan even then, almost thirty years ago.

All Margaret could catch now of the young face was the heavy stroke the eyebrows made, the imperious stare of the dark eyes, the assurance of his smile. He had finished law school, he had come back to town to spend the summer in his father's office, he had come out to the farm with some papers for her father to sign, he had seen Margaret, he had come back, often. "He's hanging around too much," her mother had said. "I don't like it. I wouldn't

like him anyway, and you have to face the fact he's not the same class, and that just means trouble." Margaret couldn't listen to her. (What a sweet baby you are, Margie! Kiss me! What's the harm?) Where, in her staid, neat body lingered the echo of that ecstasy? Lester had planned the whole thing. A friend of his, and his girl. Margaret could tell her mother she was spending the night with her—and now she couldn't remember the girl's name! There was a full moon. Lots of good places on the old boat where no one can see us, just you and me, Margie, and the moon and the water! Margaret had refused. I couldn't, Lester. It wouldn't be right. She had been faint with longing to go, she had consoled herself in bitter days afterwards that at least she had resisted temptation, she had lived up to her standards. A gull circled over her, so near she saw its round bright eye, and its cry as it swooped away was like a derisive laugh. *Aorr*, he screamed, that's how you kept your virtue, afraid you would be seasick! Had that been the reason, or was this only an ironic trick of her nerves, this lonely afternoon? Lester had been angry; before Margaret saw him again, Susan had come home from abroad. If I had gone with him that night, he was angry because he thought I did not care enough for him— He had begun to love me— I could have held him, in spite of Susan.

Margaret got to her feet, her paper bag crackled against her knee, she set her mouth firmly, what possessed her, harking back to all these old, long-lived-past moments? She was like those gulls, walking with their stiff ungraceful balance at the edge of the receding tide, under the shored-up bank from which the pier ran out, pecking over the marginal debris. The odor of the water was strong in her nostrils, brackish, fishy, town-tainted, unlike the clean

salt pungency of her own shore. She wouldn't come in town again unless she had to; she didn't like it.

Nor did she care much for the bus ride to her door. She stared out of the rattling, half-opened window, trying not to be in any way a part of the company in which she rode, women in flowered beach pajamas, in slacks, their rotundities bulging comfortably, bandanas, not too clean, tied under their chins, the ends wagging with gum-chewing and shrill talk, grubby children scrabbling all over the seats, half naked, scratches on their sunburned legs. Too early for the night crowd at Grady's, these were part of the colony this side of Grady's Park, summer cottages to rent by week or month, they rode in to the village movies as often as the bill changed. Riff-raff. Margaret hadn't been along the shore as far as the cottages since they were first built; she'd heard they were run down, rents had been reduced, the owner couldn't half fill the places, families didn't take vacations any more. A shame they'd let people like that in, lowering the tone of the place. That was the first property Susan's agent had sold, Susan had pocketed the money without the least concern what happened to the land. There was distance enough between Margaret's house and the cottages so that she seldom saw the inhabitants, except on such a bus ride. But she thought how nice it would have been to have two or three pleasant summer homes along the shore, with what she called desirable people; she could have called on them, they could have dropped in to see her. One of the children stopped beside her seat, a scrawny little girl, the scanty front of her playsuit sagging away from her flounder-flat front. She was working on an ice-cream cone, boring a hole with her tongue in the melting chocolaty mound, she stared with shrewd, pale eyes under wisps of sun-bleached hair at Margaret. The bus bounced off the edge of the pave-

ment, passing a car, and back again, the child fell in against Margaret's knee, Margaret's quick hand pushed child and dripping cone away, they were a heap at her feet, sticky cone planted on her ankle, a startled *awk* from the child. Margaret contracted, a violent physical withdrawal, at this violation of her privacy, her isolation, her very cleanliness. "Look what you've done, you bad little girl!" she said, fiercely. The child was hoisting her pointed stern, a gurgle of despair coming from near the dirty bus floor. She couldn't make it, what with the narrow space, the jerking of the bus. Margaret leaned forward, she had to do something, she slid her hands along the thin, smooth back, she pulled the child up. Amazingly, the child settled on the seat beside her, leaning against Margaret's arm, wedging what was left of the ice cream into the cone again with dirty fingers, proceeding solemnly to lap it with her pointed tongue. I had forgotten how small a child's arm feels, how small and hard a child's body, light, warm, like a little unfeathered bird—

"Ardelia, you come here, stop bothering the lady, you come here, I say!"

Ardelia slid to the floor, her eyes holding to Margaret's face for a moment, with that shrewd, unblinking stare, almost as if she measured the confusion Margaret felt. What nonsense, though Margaret, dabbing with a Kleenex at the smudge on her ankle, then jerking at the bell cord. The bus driver watched her in his mirror, he pulled to a stop, and she climbed stiffly down, not looking once at anyone in the bus as she left. She was a dirty little thing, thought Margaret, angrily. Her arm still kept that pressure, warm, light, those small, smooth bones. Lucky that mess didn't land on my dress, I'll have to change my stockings. What was the matter today, that loneliness should take so many forms to trip her? Her house waited for her,

charming, quiet, its own shadow from the low sun stretching dark across the lawn almost to her feet. The tin flag on her postbox was down, she opened the front and took out not only the daily paper, but two letters. One had the school address smartly printed on the flap. She didn't recognize the writing on the other. As she fitted her key into the lock, she told herself firmly, your holiday is almost over, you should be enjoying it instead of having such megrims. She had heard somewhere that these summer colds left you depressed, a kind of poison in the system. Maybe she should get a tonic. She put away her purchases methodically, she set her hat on the padded hat-tree in the hall closet, and then she went into the living room with paper and letters. Her reading glasses were in a drawer of the desk; she seated herself in the armchair near a window, and waited a moment, hoping for the surge of comfort which homecoming should bring, a moment to feel that warm recognition that she, Margaret Turner, had done this for herself, gained for herself this setting, this position. But today she was uneasy. She turned the letter from the school in her fingers, she found it lightly sealed, and ran her thumb under the flap. Just a note, she thought, about which day she should appear for conferences with parents.

She read the letter twice, with no shock, rather with feeling that she had read it before, that she had known all day, all summer, that it would lie in her postbox, awaiting her. The Head Mistress of the school knew that Margaret would understand, she was sorry to write so late, but probably Margaret would be relieved that she could now stay in her charming home, in the spring she had thought the budget for salaries was properly balanced, but one or two bad investments, if any investments nowadays were anything but bad, and so forth. The point being, at the end

of the third page, that Lucy Alder, the assistant, could handle all the classes in mathematics, and Margaret needn't come back. Be sure to keep in touch with us, with deep appreciation of your splendid service.

Margaret folded the letter along the creases, but she couldn't get it to slide into the envelop, it crackled and would not go in. She laid it beside her on the table, moving her hand cautiously, as if something slept here in the house which a sudden movement, a noise, might waken. Still quietly she opened the second letter, and looked at the printed circular which the non-revealing envelop contained, her face creasing wryly. Strictly confidential, to teachers, loans arranged, no other security required, no signatures except your own, absolute privacy. Teachers were all hard up, then. Or they were easy marks. But she wasn't a teacher any more, didn't they understand? Then she unfolded the newspaper, spread it on her knees. The words were there under her eyes, but they were only marks, signifying nothing. So she sat still, her hands lying on the paper, open, empty, inert. The light in the room changed, as the sun dropped under the horizon. A soft afterglow made amber highlights on polished surfaces of wood, tinted the pale ground of the chintz curtains, lay for a moment across Margaret's hands.

I might as well get my supper, she said, presently. I can't do anything about it, not tonight, anyway. If she moved softly, she wouldn't rouse the thing that slept, she knew its shape, but she could pretend she didn't know it was there at all. It stirred as she went into the kitchen, with her thought: I can make the payment on the mortgage this fall, the tax bill at the end of September, but then what do I eat, what do I burn for warmth? Oh, not tonight! I have time enough to plan, to figure out a way—

Time? She stumbled, and her hand clung against the paneling of the door.

By the middle of September Margaret had reached a cessation of worry. At least, the part of her mind that tried to look ahead, to plan, had stopped its endless fumbling search for a way out, after it had worn smooth the walls of the dark and narrow shaft into which she had been plunged, and found no crack. She had tried several things. She had made a package of the few bits of jewelry she owned, an old watch of her father's in a hunting case, earrings of her mother's, a diamond stick-pin that had come with the letters and photograph from Robert's landlady; she had taken the train one wet day early in September to the city, and after walking past the doorway three times, had forced herself into the pawnbroker's shop, past the counters of revolvers, musical instruments, clocks and candlesticks, to the dusty, railed office at the rear. The proprietor, like a queer beetle with his magnifying lens for an eye, offered her four dollars for the lot, and that's more than they're worth. Without a word she had wrapped them again in tissue paper and walked out. She had then written to Martha Miller, the plump ex-teacher who had wanted to visit her in the summer, suggesting that if Martha hadn't found a place to spend the winter, she might like to stay with Margaret. If I furnish the house, and you pay for the food— She sent the letter in care of the school, and two days later it came back, with a note from the secretary. Dear Miss Turner, No one seems to have Miss Miller's address, if I hear I'll let you know.

She had thought she might get some teaching to do in the village schools. Not full time, she'd retired because she didn't wish to go back to the city, but a class in algebra,

perhaps, or tutoring, a few hours a week. She was sorry she had made the inquiry, she dwindled and aged so under the apathetic stare of the superintendent, a youngish man with large hands from which the coat sleeves rode up. "Just a sort of bus man's holiday," she had said, brightly. "After so many years—" They had a waiting list, girls from Normal School; he didn't know whether they could even keep the schools open all winter, he'd heard rumors—

She had finally, with a fluttering desperation which made her talk too fast and give breathless little laughs, gone to the real estate office in the village. She had retired, she explained, to the portly man with ashes on his vest, who had laid down his cigar, taken off his hat, and tipped his chair forward at her entrance. She thought she might like to spend the winter in town, at a good boarding house, did he think he could rent her house, he knew it, very desirable, of course she wouldn't want a family, a large family— He had picked up his unlighted cigar, poked it into a corner of his mouth, and tipped his chair back. How much did she expect? Nobody would want to go out there for the winter, he didn't know as they would even in the summer, he'd put it on the list, property out that way wasn't worth much, folks just wanted a bed and a bath-house. He chewed reflectively, rubbing a finger over the crease in his bald forehead. "I tell you, Mrs. Turner," he said, "the trouble is, they ain't no money now, folks haven't found what to use *for* money."

When Margaret opened the door of her house that evening, she felt apologetic; she had offered it to vandals, and even that had been of no use. When she wrote the check for the mortgage payment, she folded the checkbook hastily and shut it away in a drawer, before her eye, so used to figures, could give her the balance left.

The Labor Day week end ended the season for Grady's

Park. The fireworks woke Margaret from a light, uneasy sleep, she heard cars passing all night. After that, the families moved away from the shore, driving past in laden sedans, mattresses rolled and tied on top, baby carriages and chairs wobbling at the side. School had opened, summer was over, everyone had a place to go, had to go, except Margaret. She was restless, the thin, high, valiant call of migrant birds flying under the night sky, which she heard in her wakeful hours, was like the voice of her own need to be off, to be fitted again into the routine of work. She told herself she was glad she didn't have to walk through those chattering crowds of girls, to try to keep order in study period, to explain the square of a plus b , or what x equals to young things for whom x equalled only swing music and a movie hero and love. If she could remember how wretched she had always been just at this time in September, when she had set the house in order and closed it for the winter! For a day or so she waited eagerly for the postman. Perhaps the Head Mistress would write saying that after all she needed Margaret, Lucy Alder had been taken sick, or married, or registration was so heavy. But never did Margaret think of writing to the school, Look, I've worked all these years for you, I don't know where to turn— She couldn't destroy the pleasant picture of Margaret Turner, gentlewoman, with background, home, enviable, independent. She was detached now, floating in unreality, but if she destroyed that picture she had allowed them to construct of her, what would she be? She knew exactly how they would shove her into oblivion. No one could afford sympathy in these days; if you seemed an object for—not even sympathy, just reasonable assistance—the technique was to turn upon you, accusingly. You should have known better, you should have made provision; they tied the guilt about your neck like a

flat-iron, and pushed you out of sight. That way you no longer troubled them. Look at Martha Miller, they didn't even know where she was! And Simmsy, and the others. At least, thought Margaret, I can keep my pride.

She found it hard to keep the picture of herself clear. She missed the casual inquiries, did you have a pleasant summer, you must have, of course, in that sweet house of yours, I suppose you just hated to come away, back to the same old grind. She said, I'm just restless because I've had to get to work so many years, when I get used to it— Sometimes her head felt curiously light, as if indeed she floated, the pull of gravity gone, as if she were in fact detached from the earth. Perhaps she wasn't eating enough, although she thought, I must keep up my strength, I mustn't get sick. She told Sam he needn't come again, grass didn't have to be cut in September, and then the persistent rains made the lawns as lush and green as in June. She pushed the lawn mower herself, leaning against the wooden handle, her heart whirring like the blades. The thick foliage of the wet summer still clung green to all the trees, almost as if the change of season had failed for them as well as for Margaret. No use worrying, she thought, woman or tree; there is nothing to be done about it. Nothing.

Her subscription to the newspaper expired on the eighteenth and she didn't renew it. Extraordinary, how many things she had spent money for which she didn't need. With no paper, she could omit that trip to the postbox, trailing through the incessant rain, feeling the sodden ground suck at her feet, the gusty wind pluck at her umbrella. They should have a spell of bright, warm weather after the deluge. She didn't like to start making fires yet, if she was careful, she could get along for weeks and weeks on the wood stacked in the wood-shed. She could

bring up driftwood for the fireplace, if ever it dried out.

She hadn't thought of Susan Lathrop Field since the letter from the school. For one thing, the rain had kept her from walking past the old house to the shore; for another, the letter had for a time wrenched her out of the past, even out of the present, had knocked her flat against the solid, crackless future. But when she woke Wednesday morning, she knew she had been dreaming again of Susan. A young Susan, saying, "You're so smart, Margaret, only you're scared of things." Had she ever said that, or had the dream only remembered some impatient moment when Susan tried to urge the child Maggie into action? I'm not scared any more, thought Margaret, surprised. She could move her mind into the place where fear had dwelt, and feel its emptiness, much as she might run her tongue into the gap where an aching tooth had been drawn. I wish I could see Susan, before— She stopped again, not defining that *before*. There was no rain against the windows, but the light within the room had an irregular pulsing change, from dull shadow to a quick pearl-gray, almost a hint of sun, and then to shadow again. Margaret stood at a window, tying her bathrobe cord. The vault of the sky had an uneasy counterpoint, high, thin dark clouds sweeping northward, like strokes from a fine brush, lower, cottony masses of clouds drifting more lazily toward the south, and from the rocky shore the pounding of waves. Perhaps the rainy spell was breaking up, she thought, she might walk down to see the surf.

She bathed and dressed quickly; she couldn't dally in the morning, she'd had too many years of training. It seemed warm enough for a summer frock, recklessly she took from her neat closet a white linen dress, recklessly because she would have to launder it herself. But she liked to iron; there was a simple pleasure in subduing wrinkled

cloth to perfect smoothness. The whiff of heated cotton, of starch, of bees-wax in the scorched pad, was in her nostrils, she remembered it as the smell of pride itself, the day she had been promoted from sheets and towels, her mother had allowed her to iron one of Father's shirts, white, with tucked bosom, she had stood on a box beside the ironing board, she could hear the *szz* with which the iron spat at her moistened finger-tip. Later moments of achievement had never surpassed that one.

The green belt was loose about her waist; that was good. She'd always put on weight in the fall, eating those elaborate luncheons in the school dining room. The final glimpse of herself in the mirror—even her hair looked better this morning, shining-white, the ends tucked under and pinned, she was getting so she did it pretty well herself—gave her an unexplained feeling of anticipation. There's nothing that can happen, she thought. Nothing left to happen to me. But she moved more lightly than she had for days, setting her bedroom in order, turning back sheets and blankets over a chair to air, preparing tea and toast for her breakfast. Whenever she listened, she could hear the waves down on the shore, but she postponed the walk she had promised herself, saying, first I will do this, and that. Be a good girl and finish your work first, then you can go and play. She smiled, hearing the words from her childhood. She had neglected her house lately, running around on footless errands. Not that anything was dusty; the rains had prevented that. But this morning every polished surface had a dulling over it, as if the day had laid a warm mouth close and blown upon it. Margaret rubbed tables and chairs and floors bright again, she wiped off the inside of the small-paned windows. Once or twice the sun shone out, several times the rain started again, an onslaught of long, slanting lines which stopped abruptly. When

Margaret had finished the stint she had set herself, well past noon, the rain seemed to have ceased, and as she stood at her front door, the raincoat over her arm beating in the wind, she saw how shadows of torn clouds moved swiftly over the sun-lit landscape, like waves of an advancing tide of night. She hesitated a moment, because the wind was strong, but the surf pounded loud, and she thought, I ought to see it, I don't remember ever hearing it so loud.

She had to step back inside the hall to get her arms into the sleeves of the raincoat, she tied a scarf over her head, she locked her door and hid the key under one of the stones that bordered the row of tattered perennial stalks, glancing first up and down the deserted highway to make sure no one watched. Then she pushed herself into the wind, she leaned against it, she climbed against it, breathing hurt, it was a great hand laid against her chest, pressing it back against her spine. She reached the shelter of the old barn, and stopped, gasping. She could breathe there, and the air tingled to the tips of her fingers. She wouldn't be beaten by a few gusts, she meant to look at the water. The ground was littered with leaves, they ran on the wind, not single and brown as in the fall, but torn clumps, branches of green leaves. Behind her the wind scooped at the barn roof, and old gray shingles flew off, no noisier than the leaves. Presently she went on, turning sidewise, ducking her head. The house afforded another lee, as she passed it, she walked close to it, liking the space of silence under the walls, the noise and the wind came over the roof like a wave, not touching her, breaking farther out in the great trees. She ducked her head again, wading through the long wet grass toward the shore, and suddenly, although the sun shone now, her face was wet, her lashes were beaded. She tasted salt on her lips, and saw the spray break above the rocks. Queer, be-

cause the tide was low now, she had looked it up in her almanac that morning, she had thought the rain had stopped as the tide ebbed. Instead, even on the sheltered shore where the bath-house stood, the waves broke higher than the top step, the air was full of salt spray, stinging her eyelids so that she could scarcely see the craziness of the water beyond the point. That's very queer, she thought. I must have made a mistake, it's high tide now. She rubbed her eyelids dry. The reef which made the extension of the rocky shore beyond the point, and protected the harbor side, was now so submerged it had no line of breakers, and as Margaret stared, one wave—a seventh wave, she thought, remembering a bit of child lore—rushed up, a splendid smooth wall of green, over the rocks, broke into white over the grass, and crawled back as if discomfited at that strange contact. Then, without a sound above the wind and water, the old bath-house rose slowly, a foot or two, and lurched forward, flattening like a cardboard box, sliding out uncertainly as the beach was sucked bare between waves. A huge cloud shadow moved over the water, dimming the brilliant green and white to gray, almost to black, it covered the land, too, and Margaret turned inland. If it meant to rain again, she had better hurry back to her house. It would be less lonely inside a house; the curious excitement of anticipation which had carried her since waking, like a wave, had broken all about her feet into complete solitude. She had just taxed herself too much, fighting the wind. It was behind her now, she went quickly with it, head down, she felt flat as paper, the wind carrying her along. When she reached the old house, she would stop for a moment on the kitchen porch, to rest.

She saw, not believing, that the long weathered green shutters of the drawing room at the corner of the house were open. Had the wind— Then she saw that the inner

blinds were folded back, a figure moved within the room. The wind swept her on, in spite of her desire to stand there, staring, around the corner of the house. The side door, under the porte-cochere, was open, a man stood there, poised in haste to be off, a youngish stocky man with a brimmed cap pushed back on his head. Margaret had a good look at him, square forehead, handsome eyes under full lids, a young mouth twisted impatiently, a short, round chin that jutted well forward.

"What do you want to stay here for?" he was saying. "Come along with me now, and save me the trip back."

"It won't take you ten minutes to drive out for me." The voice came from within the hall, and at its sound, full, rich, amused, Margaret lifted her head, moved a step nearer, leaning stiffly against the push of the wind. "Run along, darling?"

"You're crazy! A day like this—"

"It's a nice day, Eddie. Exciting, here at the shore. I won't go sit in that garage while you tinker over the car. I'll look for that box I told you about. Why, maybe I won't go with you when you come back!"

Eddie's face changed, it was impudent and cajoling. "You promised!"

"Before I came back here, came—home. I had forgotten—" The voice drew Margaret to the edge of the steps. Eddie shrugged, he flung up one hand as the elm behind him bent in the wind and straightened again, with a noise through all its wet leaves like the tearing of paper.

"Listen to that! I don't like it!" he cried out, "I don't like leaving you!" Then he saw Margaret. As he stared, a figure moved through the doorway to stand on the narrow porch, a plump figure stepping briskly on small feet in high-heeled wine-colored sandals, a wine-colored coat fluttering as the wind caught it, the long bands of golden lynx

flattening in the wind, the chiffon veil which tied on the brimmed hat moving, and there, above the fur, under the hat, a small face, pointed, wrinkled, with an astonishing russet rim of curled hair, with eyes green and alive and laughing under penciled brows and darkened lashes, there stood Susan herself.

"You're just a poor little city fellow," she was saying. "Any weather makes you nervous as a kite. Who's that?" One hand, with a flash of maroon-lacquered cusps, dove into the softly moving lynx over the deep, full bosom, came out with a sparkling lorgnette, and through it Susan looked at Margaret. "No, don't tell me! Let me guess!" She came forward, stepping like a pigeon on her stilted sandals, peering down, and Margaret braced herself, her hands hard against the rough surface of the granite step, her heart beating in her palms. "It is—" (How had she forgotten that voice of Susan's, the way it made each word round and separate and charged with meaning, not the dull words that other people spoke, but sound made of feeling, itself, like notes plucked softly on a violin, or like the speech of birds.) "It's Maggie! Those eyes! It is Maggie!" She made a gay, grasping gesture with her hands, the lorgnette swinging on its chain. "Come up here where I can see you!"

Margaret moved up the steps, past the young man, who eyed her without curiosity, chewing his lip, impatient at the interruption; she was pinned for a moment against lynx and soft bosom, scent of perfume and powder pricking through the warm salt wet odor of the wind, Susan was kissing her with lips powdery and dry under the lipstick, her mouth had changed, the upper lip was thin and fine in spite of paint, the under lip had transverse creases in its fullness. "Darling little Maggie! This is perfect!" Susan had Margaret's cold fingers between the soft palms of her

two hands. "You can stay with me while Eddie mends the car. This is an old friend, Eddie. When I was a little girl—" Susan stopped, her head a little at an angle, her lively eyes inspecting Margaret, her smile quick and sly. "Maggie was very good to me, she was lots older, but she let me tag her around, didn't you? Run along, Eddie, darling! I don't care if you never come back!"

"You'll get your fill of this before I'm back," said Eddie, firmly, and Margaret pulled her fingers out of Susan's grasp, she stood stiff, her knees quivering, she opened her mouth to speak. But Eddie, with a quick salute, was running along the driveway, the two women watching him, through the brandishing branches of trees there was a glimpse of the car, long and cream-colored and shining, pointed in from the highway. "He didn't dare drive in, this old lane is soft," said Susan. The wind carried away all sound, they saw the car back away, vanish, silent as a dream. Susan sighed. "He's crazy about that car, we practically drowned it this morning, where was it, I don't remember, the roads were rivers, just rivers, Maggie! You'd never believe it. So we turned back, to try this route, and the motor began to spit. There we were, at Eastbourne. I said, Eddie, you better drive straight on to New York, I warn you! But would Eddie? No. I tell him if he'd treat a woman as he does that car!" Susan laughed. "So then I came here." Something fey leaped in her green eyes, drifted across her pointed face. "The wind shouted at me, come home, Susan, before it is too late! And here you are!"

Margaret held her hands down against the flutter of her raincoat, she said, stiffly, "I'm not older than you!"

Susan blinked at her, and then laughed. "I just said that, you know how men are! I thought you were, I really did! You *have* kept your figger, but you've let your hair go white. Um-um. Let's go inside, I can't hear in this wind, I

don't like standing around, my feet are too small." She slid her hand under Margaret's arm, she trotted her along into the house, it was a dive into stillness, into an absence of buffeting which bewildered Margaret, she was a child, following Susan's bidding, all her protests, her planned upbraiding whisked away like the leaves which filled the air around the house. The hall was dim, but the drawing room had light from the long windows where the shutters had been opened, dust covers shrouded the chairs, the divan, even the crystal chandelier, everything was muted to gray, a gray film of dust over the squares of the parquetry floor, beyond the windows a film of gray, not dust, over the sky. Green-gray mildew made queer patterns, a geography of decay, over the wall paper with its gold and satin stripes. The cool, fusty air within the house was sucked out through the opened door, the warm breath of the wind flowed in around them.

"It's a good deal like a tomb," said Susan. "But Eddie had to close the windows again, that wind would blow the paper off the wall! Maggie, it's wonderful to see you! Take that thing off your head. Your hair is pretty, just as heavy as ever, isn't it? Do you think white hair softens a face? I've wondered sometimes—but a man never likes white hair, you know, he sees that first— Ah, you're really the same Maggie, I always liked white on you, proud and quiet— You sit here by the window, I have to find something, a box of trinkets. I think I can lay my hand right on it. Then you must tell me everything you've done—"

Margaret stood there in the middle of the room where Susan left her, listening to the quick tap of heels across the hall. On the wide stairs the velvet-padded stair-runner absorbed the sound, but presently it came again overhead, little flurries of taps, like a Morse code of a search for a box of trinkets. She thought, now is my chance to say the

things I've wanted to, so long; but she thought it doubtfully and in confusion, her heart beat too rapid. So long—since anyone had called her Maggie, had, in a glance, looked past her neat and formal outer self, had—oh, however lightly, gaily!—looked at her with human warmth. It's just her voice, thought Margaret, sounding as if she cared more than she does. Look at her, decked out like a girl, traipsing about with that—that Eddie, shameless—She listened to the faint sounds overhead, she thought, I don't have to stay here, I can go on to my own house, and she wished, instead, to follow Susan upstairs, because the drawing room without her was high and gray and empty, and the air that blew in warm puffs through the open door was the breath of restlessness.

The footsteps overhead had stopped, and Margaret moved to one of the long windows. She didn't want Susan thinking she'd been struck dumb and immovable by her! The window was recessed, the blinds folded back on each side, and from the narrow, closed slats there rose a fine dust, flecks of dried enamel, circling in spirals up the window edges. I never saw wind do that, thought Margaret. Holding her hands out toward the glass, she felt it, a strong suction against the palms. A branch struck the window, startling her, leaves crumpled and torn, clung to the glass as the branch fell away. Rain had started again, fine slanting rain, which obscured the water, she was not sure whether she really saw gray waves running over the grass, well in beyond the rocky shore, as if the ocean were moving inland, or whether she saw only the rain. Even within the house now she could hear the water, loudly enough so that she was again not sure what she had heard in the hall. But she went quickly across the room. Something small and hard slid under the ball of her foot as she stepped into the hall, on the bottom step of the wide stairs

was a heap of lynx fur and wine-colored coat, the hat knocked forward, hiding the face.

"Don't step on them, they're all over the place!" Susan pushed back her hat, thrust her feet out straight in front. "Damn that stair carpet!"

"Did you fall? Have you hurt yourself?" Margaret ran across to the stairs on tiptoe, skirting the small red velvet box which lay there, its cover bent open, its contents scattered. "Susan!"

"I damned near took a header." Susan hitched herself upright, she wriggled first one toe, then the other. "Don't you pull me up, not yet. Pick up that stuff for me while I get my breath." She threw aside her hat, her hair, an astonishing brick color in the dim hall, stood up over her small head in wisps and curls.

"Those heels are enough to kill anybody," said Margaret, as she bent to gather up the box and its contents.

"Nonsense." Susan drew in her feet, her skirts sliding above her knees, she laid a hand around each slim ankle. "I was hurrying, that's all. I wanted to see you before Eddie gets back."

"This is the box you had—" Margaret drew a finger over the velvet. "I remember it." White satin lining, yellowed with age, gold clasp, the cover dangling by one hinge. Most of the contents lay where the box had fallen, rings, a child's bracelet of gold, a brooch of garnets, a gold necklace with a locket, a pearl in the center of a blue enameled flower. Margaret stood erect, her temples throbbing, the necklace hanging from her finger.

"It was my first jewel case," said Susan. "I had forgotten it, it was in the little wall safe in the bedroom, the one I open with my initials. I thought there were some pearls in it. I told Eddie I'd have them made into studs." She

giggled. "He's never had a dress suit, he's going to get one."

"You gave me this, once," said Margaret.

"What is it?" Susan squinted toward her. "Oh, that. How'd it get in the box, then?"

Margaret set the box on Susan's knee, she let the necklace fall into the satin bed. "You forgot to give it back."

"Did I! Oh, Maggie! And you felt bad! Oh, darling, do you want it now?"

"No." Margaret went on with her search. A string of amber had broken, the beads had rolled everywhere, at the threshold they gleamed like eyes of a cat, elsewhere they were hard to find, she gathered them cool and hard in her fingers. She found a small irregular nugget of gold, and laid it in Susan's hand. Susan turned it in her painted finger-tips.

"Why, that's the very nugget Rob sent me." She looked up at Margaret, her eyes like the amber. "Your brother! His first gold, he said."

"And his last," said Margaret. Ah, it was coming, now, her chance to tell Susan—

But Susan said, softly, "If he hadn't gone away!" The nugget dropped from her fingers into the box. "That always happens when I come back to this house!" She raised her voice against a gust of wind, the rain blew in across the hall. "I go soft as jelly—like an old woman! Shut the door, Maggie, we don't want to drown! And give me a hand."

Margaret tugged at the door, she edged behind it and pushed, both hands laid against the wooden panels, it seemed almost to bend, as if it would fold over her head, and then, so abruptly that she staggered and followed it for an awkward step, it was snatched away from her and whanged shut. She righted herself indignantly, disliking

the large and impersonal rudeness of the day. "It must be blowing harder," she said. "I should think it had blown long enough!"

Susan laughed, a low, delighted laugh, extending her hands to Margaret.

"You never did like storms." She heaved her soft flesh up, dragging hard on Margaret's hands. "I remember. They blew up your skirts and ruffled your hair and you couldn't manage them. Pick up the box, Maggie, it's on the step there. I don't see where those pearls are, they were earrings, three little dangling pearls for each ear. Maybe I lost them."

"You did hurt yourself! When you fell—" Margaret felt Susan's weight pull at her shoulder, she saw the stiff dragging forward of one foot.

"I just sat down too hard. I'll be all right in a minute. Help me across to a chair, that's a good Maggie. That divan's nearer—"

Margaret got her to the divan, stood above her in dismay. But Susan leaned back, her wry mouth changing into a quick smile. "I'm too fat, I might as well admit it!"

"Where is it, Susan? Your foot? Ankle? Let me take off your shoe—"

Susan crossed one ankle over the other. "No, you don't! I'd never get it back on. Leave it alone. In ten minutes I'll be all right, I always am."

"I could run over to my house and get you something—"

"All you'd get would be a soaking! Why, look—" The two women looked, at one window and then at the other. Outside the house the rain made a solid wall, over the inner surface of the glass the rain poured, falling against the wide sill, falling against the floor, it was as if the glass had lost its essential quality and was no longer imper-

meable, as if the rain drove through it, piercing it like light. Margaret stared, bewilderment tasted dry in her mouth, not the sharp taste of fear.

"It must be getting in around the edges of the panes," said Susan, slowly. "That old putty—"

"I ought to wipe it up," said Margaret. "I haven't anything to wipe it up with—"

"What harm can it do?" Susan turned away from the windows, she threw her coat back from her shoulders, her throat, above the low V of the dull red frock, was white and full. "Unless it gets our feet wet. Sit down, Maggie, there are so many things to say. Eddie'll be back any moment, he hates this, he'll want to get on to New York."

Margaret looked again at the windows; if she watched, she would be frightened. The dust cover on the divan stretched taut from Susan's bulk to the arms, there wasn't room there. She brought one of the hooded small chairs and set it with its back toward the windows, rather near Susan, and seated herself.

"Where's your house?" asked Susan. "Near here?"

"It's the farmhouse. I bought it."

"You did?" Susan's face was alert, admiring.

"We should have gone there, instead of staying here. I've made a charming place of it, it's not like this." She glanced toward that appalling wetness. "I ought to be there now! Something might happen."

"It will be all right. Nothing can happen to your house, Maggie. You always could worry. I noticed someone lived there, someone— It's funny, your coming back here! You know, I've always thought someday I would come back. To stay. When we drive anywhere near here, I have to come. But I didn't want to stay—yet. I—I'm not happy when I'm here."

Margaret laid her hands together in her lap, her cold

fingers hooked, she hugged her elbows against her sides, she felt herself spare, hard, her white dress limp now, drabbed, and anger began to shrill in her head, like the highest note in which the wind now spoke, anger at the difference between herself and this soft woman on the couch, a heap of silk and furs and jewels, her painted mouth beguiling Margaret with her Maggie this and that.

"You see"—again that fey look, a shadow over Susan's gaiety—"I'll tell you—it was strange, my landing here just today. Yes, I'll tell you. Did you wonder why we were so crazy, driving to New York in such weather? You'd never guess. Eddie's going to school, he's going to be an engineer, he's not really a chauffeur. But he's very proud, he didn't want me to help him at first. And I thought I'd like to settle down, I'd like to be sure I had somebody. We were going to get married. I haven't been married for a long time. He's younger, but he's quite old for his years, he's always had to look out for himself." She lifted her lorgnette, it shimmered in unsteady fingers as she held it to her eyes. "Aren't you ever afraid of being alone? When you get older, you don't want to be alone. But the minute I stepped in this house, I knew. I'd be lonelier with him—Who lives in your house with you?"

"I am alone," said Margaret. Her anger was a rod now, stiffening her back. "But thank God, I'm respectable!"

Susan blinked through her lorgnette, she let it fly down against her full bosom, she tipped back her head with its ragged petals of hair, and laughed. "Oh, Maggie! Maggie, darling!" Her laughter was warm and round in the strange gray room. "What good does that do you?"

"You wouldn't understand, you're shameless and dreadful, your name is a byword, men leer after you—" Margaret had to stop, her anger was a tight band around her chest, her heart strained madly against it.

Susan stopped laughing, she leaned forward a little, holding out her hands, fingers spread, soft white palms with deep creases turned up, as if she held Margaret's words away from her ears. "Why, Maggie, you—you don't like me?" Her eyes were incredulous, her mouth sagged a trifle.

Margaret stumbled to her feet, she pushed away the chair, and before she could make a word in her parched throat the hall door crashed open, wind tore into the house, bellying the covers on the furniture, and with it the boy Sam, water running from his cap, from his yellow slicker, so that he stood in a pool there at the entrance to the drawing room.

"Geeze!" His voice was faint, a gasp, and gathered force as he caught his breath. "Hurry up! Eddie sent me—I had to leave the car—they's a tree down—you'll have to walk out to it— Come along, I say! We ain't got a minute!"

Susan looked at him, she tucked her feet farther under the edge of the couch. "Where's Eddie?" she asked.

"Working on your car, him and Bill. Water in the base." His sandy face was blanched with rain and excitement, he wriggled inside his slicker, wanting to be off. "You gotta hustle, I tell you! Geeze, I never seen nothing like it! The tide didn't go down, Bill says when it's high tide again, the road'll be under water, we got an hour to make it."

"Where's the car?" asked Margaret. "Can't you bring it—"

"I can't climb over a tree with it!" Sam shrieked above the wind, he swung his arms. "Can't you get a move on you? You can walk a few steps, can't you?"

Margaret listened. There was a new note in the wind, one she had never heard before in all her life, a strange,

shrill, high note: it hurt her eardrums, it went spinning into hollow places under her skull, almost obscenely, a note beyond the range of hearing. She scurried across the room toward Sam, picking up her raincoat, thrusting her arms into the sleeves.

"Come on, you!" yelled Sam, jerking his hand at Susan.

Margaret's fingers were clumsy, tying the scarf over her head, she stood at the doorway, the rain struck her face, she drew one long breath, and held it, aching-endlessly, dashing a hand against her wet eyelids that she might see. One of the two great elms which stood each side the portecochere, the one farther from the house, toward the road, without a sound that she could hear above the wind, with slow and appalling dignity, swayed, bent, twisted its leafy bulk as if it turned to look at the enemy that struck it down, and fell, carrying with it a great round slab of yellowish earth, a mat of roots and wet soil as high as the roof of the carriage entrance. Sam whimpered with excitement.

"Now you see! My God, ain't this something! Get her started, will you?"

Margaret heard Susan's voice, it made a quiet place in all this tumult, for a moment she did not hear the separate words, speech seemed to have no meaning, she had to shape them again in her own throat before she understood what Susan had said. "I won't stir a step in this downpour. I'd be drenched to the skin."

Sam seized Margaret's wrist, jerked it. His young mouth twisted in grotesque attempt to be strong and male, rescuing women. "I can't drag her," he cried. "We gotta go, you come, Miss Turner, you ain't such a fool!"

Margaret dragged her raincoat together with her free hand, for an instant she felt herself plunge forward with

the boy, his strength running beside her, carrying her to safety. Then she wrenched her wrist out of his grasp and took a quick step toward the drawing room, and her voice was strange in her ears as she cried out, "Susan—"

Susan waved her hand, a careless farewell, she pushed herself to her feet, her coat sliding in a soft mound around her on the floor, her face impertinent, mocking.

Swifter than thought, Margaret knew. "Run along, Sammy." She made her stiff face smile. "Tell—tell Eddie we're all right here. Tell him Mrs. Field can't—"

"Run along yourself, Maggie! What you waiting for?" Susan was imperative, silencing her. "I don't want your company! You're too respectable! The house won't blow down."

Margaret pushed at Sam, who hung in the doorway, tormented. "For Heaven's sake, Sam, get out! I don't intend to drown myself in that rain! Why should I want to go to town? Pull that door shut after you—" She laid herself against the door, his desire to be off and her will together shut it, and water curled swiftly under it, over the floor.

She hesitated, taking a few steps into the drawing room. Susan had dropped back on the couch, she was pulling her coat from under her feet, her eyes angry, green, as she looked at Margaret.

"You're a fool, Maggie!"

"You can't even stand on that foot, can you?"

"What's that to do with you?"

"Why didn't you let me tell him?" Margaret moved nearer, step by step, her hands twisting together at her breast. "Were you afraid your Eddie would risk his life, trying to get you?"

Susan laid her coat over her knees, her hands smoothing the fur, the fingers disappearing in the long tawny hairs, she was silent a moment; when she looked up her face was

somber, on each side of her mouth lower than the rouged cheek-bones was a dull red streak. "No, Maggie. If you must know, I was afraid he wouldn't. I'd rather not know. Think how embarrassed I'd be if I called for help—and no one came! This way—" She turned her head, listening; the arrows of the wind whistled over the house. "There's a queer smell to the air," she said. "It's like some strange drug, you take a sniff and you don't go on fooling yourself." Her somberness was gone, in a little flashing smile. "Why did you stay, Maggie? You're scared to death, you know you are, that nice boy would have taken you—"

"You let me see your foot, Susan Lathrop," said Margaret, sternly. She knelt stiffly in front of Susan, she pushed the folds of coat away from Susan's knees, and laid her hands on the pointed toes of the sandals, pulling both feet toward her. Then she sat back, her fingers touching the swollen ankle, puffy and discolored through the chiffon stocking. "Your poor foot!" she said. Susan leaned forward, eyeing both extended feet. "I have such nice ankles, too," she said, gaily. Then, "Why, Maggie! You're crying!"

"You would have stayed here—"

Susan stretched one hand out, pushed the scarf back from Margaret's hair, smoothed the hair softly, and laughed. "And so you stayed. With a shameless, dreadful—Maggie, what do people say about me?" Her fingertip touched Margaret's forehead, brushed over her eyelids.

Margaret got to her feet, with an abrupt movement. The iron band, the iron rod of her anger had gone, she did not know what the feeling was which inundated her, it was like the rain, finding its way past barriers of glass and wood, it was like the wave curling over grass, receding, advancing again.

"It's not raining so hard," she said. "Look, it's stop-

ping!" The wind had no shrillness now, through the window they could see the water, breaking in long streamers of white. "I'm going to run over to my house, to get some things for that ankle. It's just a little way."

Susan reached for her skirt, but Margaret moved with her quick, light step toward the hall. "Don't go, Maggie! Suppose you couldn't get back!"

"I'll get back!" Margaret chose the one argument to silence Susan. "I ought to see that everything's all right in my house, if the rain got in there—"

"Leave the door open," called Susan. "It's too warm—"

The door opened so readily, swinging inward, that Margaret thought someone must stand there, someone who had come for them, Sam, or Eddie. No one. There was a yellow lake where the elm tree had torn up the great slab of soil, with a ragged fringe of turf, and water rippled along the driveway. But the rain had stopped; the mist which filled the air was salty on her mouth. She would get her feet soaked, but it was so warm she wouldn't catch cold; she could get bandage stuff, rubbing alcohol, perhaps pack a basket with food, it might be several hours before anyone could reach the house. The water was only ankle-deep, she splashed ahead, had the wind changed? It seemed running to meet her, in warm little puffs, coming over the land. She rounded the rear corner of the house and stopped. Ahead of her rose a great mass of green, a tree, hiding the sky, filling the space ahead of her; she thought, amazed, why, that's the way a bird sees a tree, looking into it, and then, hastily, moved out around its bulk, her feet heavy in the tangled grass and sodden ground. It was a long way past a fallen tree, its roots stood up above her, she could not tell just where she had come, and she stopped. Something was wrong, like looking at a familiar face and finding it had no eyes, no mouth— The barns! Where were they? She

began to run, laboring, her breath catching, there were other trees down, but already her eyes had accustomed themselves to that form of disaster, she could see ahead of her under the mottled sky the rising land on which her house stood, she could see the house itself, its white paint shining, the only clear tone in all the landscape; it had been built to weather storms, she thought, its low, sturdy shape settled against the land. The old apple tree at one side sprawled askew. Margaret stumbled against something, a log, no, a timber, gray, with marks of the ax like ripples of water, a beam from the barn. The water was deeper here, halfway to her knees, and ahead of her, ridiculously, as if it walked over the field, moved a splintered door, she could see the hasp where a padlock had hung. She took another step, and stopped, trembling.

The door was floating more quickly now, oscillating. Those green clumps must be the tops of the lilac bushes, and lilacs stood higher than her head. If she hurried, plunging forward, she could still cross. She stared, turning her head slowly in a half circle. The ocean was moving inland, breaking through at the low bit of shingle where the wall of rocks began to merge into the long sandy beach, cutting across, gouging across, the sod under her feet broke under her weight, eaten by the water, and she braced herself, feeling water move against her legs. The thought of her house was a voice shouting at her, hurry, you can still reach me! Safety, shelter, her house, in a way her life, her love, all that she had! She was strong, the current could not yet be swift, she could swim. The muddy water eddied around the lilac clumps, she saw it close over one of them. She could reach her house, and stay there, she could not return. What claim had Susan on her, like that of her house? *Don't go, Maggie!* She set her teeth into her lower lip, she thought, in a kind of dull incredulity, Why, no tide ever

rose as fast as this, and slowly, without another glance at water, hill, or house, she turned back. As she went she thought the water followed at her heels, and when at last she reached the stone steps she was not surprised that the pool beneath the elm-tree roots had merged into a larger flood, and that little waves beat up against the disk of mud. We're on an island, now. Cut off.

Her side hurt, and she stood, pressing her hand against it, before she went into the house. She closed the door, and the squelch of her shoes was loud in what seemed, after the outer tumult, like silence. Susan was sitting just where Margaret had left her, and her breast rose and fell in one long sigh. Margaret hung her raincoat over the newel post, she rubbed a handkerchief over her face, her eyes burned; she wrung the bottom of her skirt, and tried to pat it smooth.

"I couldn't get anything for your ankle," she said. "It was so wet—"

Susan beckoned her nearer. "Are you all right? I thought once I heard you cry out! I started after you, but I can't hop on one foot. Not far. I told you you'd just get drenched. You—you didn't see anyone—coming?"

"No, I didn't." Margaret sank down on the chair, she couldn't yet draw a full breath, her toes curled inside her wet shoes. Irritation jingled through her weariness. How could anybody come? She opened her mouth to tell Susan what she had seen, and said, instead, "Does it hurt much?"

"It hurt like hell while you were gone." Susan grimaced. "You know, the way everything's worse when you're by yourself. Wind, rain, aches, anything. I don't mind it now. I tell you, if I stuck it up—" She swung around sideways on the divan, and with both hands under her plump knee, hoisted it up. A scarlet garter made a cushion of the soft flesh above the knee. Susan patted it, hoisted the other leg,

and leaned back against the arm of the divan. "That's better. Now you pull your chair around, and we'll talk. I think the storm is over, the sky is lighter, see?"

Lighter, yes, with a sullen yellowish tinge under the dull clouds. Susan held one wrist near her eyes, squinting at the tiny jeweled watch, the sleeve slipping back from the plump white arm, creased at the wrist like a baby's. "It's stopped," she said. "I must have hit it when I took that tumble. Now we don't even know what time it is!" She eased herself a little into place, her hands looked small, lying against the maroon silk which strained over her wide soft thighs. "Well, I never did know the time! You always did, Maggie! Remember how it worried you, being on time?" She laughed. "Well, we've no date to keep today, have we? It's nice, having you here. It took a storm, didn't it, to make you put up with me?" Her smile was sly. "You don't really think I'm all those names you were calling me, do you? Anyway, you stayed with me. You know, when you started for your house, I thought maybe you were clearing out."

Margaret hitched her chair over the floor, nearer the couch. "I wanted to," she said, her mouth grim. "I don't know why I came back." She thought, all these things are true about Susan, disgraceful, disgusting, and yet I'm sitting here—I don't mind being wet, or frightened—She lifted her head as the whole house shivered, she heard the wind after it had passed the house, and then a rumbling clatter, an avalanche of dull noise.

"Is it raining stones now?" said Susan.

"I know. The chimney!" Margaret glanced behind her at the marble and onyx face of the fireplace, she thought the sheet of metal which covered the opening bulged outward, she saw a dark lip of sooty water along the lower edge, creeping out over the hearth.

"What's a chimney more or less?" Susan relaxed again, but she laid a hand on Margaret's knee. "I was thinking—while you were gone—that's what this damned house always does to me, sets me thinking. You never married, Maggie? Have you been happy?"

Margaret sat very still, the queer sweet smell of the air perplexed her, it was like morning, not like any morning she had known, but some morning in a dream. She tried to gather around her the tatters of the Margaret Turner she had meant to show to Susan, to confound Susan, a proud, righteous, worthy woman, and she couldn't find even a tatter.

"You should have married Lester Field," said Susan. "If he'd had you admiring him, looking up to him—if he'd had to work—"

"But you took him, you ruined him."

"You might have put up a fight for him. I didn't know he'd ever seen you! Oh, I heard, afterwards. He was a snob, Maggie, a lazy, selfish snob. You were the farmer's daughter, and do you know what I was? I was a good marriage. Making a good marriage and sleeping with it aren't the same thing! I was glad when he took that header off his horse, it takes too long to die of drink. When I come back here I think about him—and Robert. It's funny, isn't it, how you see the ends of stories, as you grow older. When you're young, you never think that anything will end, you will love forever, you'll suffer forever, you're sewed up tight in what you feel right now—" Her mouth trembled a little, the lipstick on the under lip had smeared thin, leaving a fine line of red below the outline of the lip. "Now I know all the endings. I know how things come out. Oh, I pretend I don't, that's the only way to have any fun—" Her fingers pressed on Margaret's knee, and the two looked steadily at each other—are you frightened, uneasy?—as

the whole house strained under the wind, timbers sliding behind plaster, like the sound of movement in wood and metal of a ship.

It's true, thought Margaret; you begin to see the pattern that a whole life makes, you do know the ends of stories. I have been troubled about my own, it was coming in a circle back to all its beginnings. She laid one hand over Susan's, she felt a lightness in her blood, an ease, it was like a dream to sit there, with hatred and envy gone.

"Look," said Susan, "it is raining again." She turned to glance over the back of the divan toward the windows, they saw the way the water had covered the floor, running under the door, down from the window ledges, out from the fireplace, until it made a streaked covering, reflecting oddly the shapes of the chairs, the angle of the walls, reaching the carved feet of the divan.

"If you could walk—" Margaret was bewildered. "Could you get upstairs, if I helped?"

"I can't, not without crawling." Susan lifted her coat away from the floor. "I'm comfortable right here. You aren't scared, Maggie? Rain can't wash this house away."

"I don't know what I am," said Margaret, a little pettishly.

"I must look a sight," said Susan. "Where's my hand-bag? I had it when we came in. There it is, on the mantel, get it for me, Maggie, dear."

Margaret took the few steps to the mantel, she thought the tessellated floor moved under her feet, she thought as she looked down that water crept up along the lines of the patterned oak, how could it? Was there a new sound in the house, a gurgle of water under the floor, a steady slap-slap?

"You know, Eddie reminds me a lot of Robert," Susan was saying, as Margaret handed her the bag. She poked

a finger under the rhinestone clasp and spread the bag open. "I hadn't thought of it before. What happened to Robert, Maggie?"

"He died. He got typhoid in that mining camp." (Where he went because of you: tell her!) Margaret stood close to the couch.

"Dead?" Susan looked up, a vanity case snapped open in one hand. "I didn't know." There was a crease between her plucked, accented brows. "He would be an old man now, wouldn't he? He was older than you—or me—I never thought of that before." She shrugged. "I don't like elderly men, they fuss so—diet, liver—they have hairs in their ears and their teeth clack! Robert—ah, he didn't have to grow old! He was beautiful. Eddie isn't really like him. Why, I remember the row they made about Robert, right here in this room! Father and Mother—about Susan Lathrop and her groom! I didn't care, I loved him. But he cared, he was furious. He went away, west. I would have waited forever—at least I thought so." She began to pat powder over her face, the scent strong for a moment. "But I couldn't stand his taking the money."

"What money?" Margaret leaned closer, her hands clasped; Susan's voice had dropped; it was an unhappy whisper against the background of steady noise around them. Susan set her lips together and dusted her chin. "What money?" urged Margaret.

"The money my father gave him, if he'd go off. I—I suppose he was poor—"

"Is that what they told you?" Margaret's scorn brought Susan's eyes up from the mirror. "You might have known it was a lie! Robert never took a cent, except his wages. Why, I sent him money that year, when I began to teach, money for food!"

"I might have known," said Susan, slowly. "I wasn't as

smart then. Why, Maggie, it's like a present! Everything was criss-cross, and we're laying it all straight."

"When he died, his landlady sent me his things," said Margaret. "His account book, and a picture of you—and a letter. I would never give you the letter."

"I don't want to see the picture!" Susan peered again into the little mirror, she fished a lipstick out of the bag. She made a stroke with the pencil, but her hand wavered, and the crimson was a clown's mouth. Angrily she dabbed at it with a handkerchief, sticking out the point of her tongue to moisten a corner. "I don't care how I look," she said. She dropped the lipstick, mirror, handkerchief, into the purse, and pinched the rhinestones shut. "I've been a fool, haven't I? But you have to have somebody to love as long as you live, don't you?" Her voice was warm again, and clear. "Whatever they've been, I've had the loving of them. Nobody can take that away!"

Margaret had drawn away from the divan, her shoulders hunched, her hands doubled into fists. She wanted to listen to Susan, but something, *something* was moving past the windows at the end of the room, was looking in. She walked toward the windows, slowly, not to frighten Susan, her feet slipping in the water, inches deep, which covered the floor, not quiet water, but water that swung as if the whole house rocked a little. The room was darker, and she saw she stared at the peaked roof of a house outside the windows, cutting off all light, all glimpse of ocean, a jagged hole where there had been a chimney; and it floated higher than the upper ledges of the windows. Margaret looked at it without great concern; she had lost her standard by which she measured what happened, nothing now was astonishing. The dark, slanting roof moved toward the house, as if it meant to climb in through the windows, and then was sucked away. Margaret saw the ocean, it had

come above the window sills, a wave climbed up the sash, and its spray stung her face there inside the house. She looked out, across the gray-green rollers, not surprised that all the land was gone, every tree was gone, and the house itself was islanded. She saw, between her and the sky, one great wall, like fog turned into solid matter, high as the sky, advancing without haste, with dignity. When that breaks, she thought, and turned away from the window. She could run, she could climb the stairs, the attic of the house was high, she would be safe there!

"What you looking at?" asked Susan.

"A wave," said Margaret. She started across the floor, her feet begged her to run, they were separate, alive, insisting upon flight, she couldn't save Susan, too, there was no time—no time. At the edge of the couch she stopped, her hand reached for Susan's, she slipped to the floor, shutting her eyes, laying her face against Susan's soft breast. "Hang on," she whispered, "hang on tight to me! I'm not afraid any more, with you."

"Why, Maggie!" said Susan, and under Margaret's ear her heart, undefeated, quickened its beat. For an instant, in the great blackness which filled the room, a whirling blackness under the wall of water, Margaret thought that they were children again, running ahead of the storm, she with her hand in Susan's. "We'll stick together!" cried Susan, and her voice had the golden curl of a trumpet. "Till we die!" If it was fear that Margaret felt, it had, at the last, the strong sweet taste of great elation. The wave walked over the house, the wind pried at the walls, the front wall yielded first, falling outward, with a soughing soft note, and the water swept through.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Food for Thought

HUBERT KETCHEM WEBSTER was finishing his lecture, the ninth in a series of ten, on Aspects of Contemporary Literature, given during the winter to the literature section of the Women's Club. Finishing it cleverly just as the clock at the end of the hall said ten minutes to four, leaving time for questions before the serving of tea, finishing it with a delightful touch of informal humor after his impassioned attack upon what he called the "back fence school of realism." He had gone over well today, he had seen that in emphatic nodding of heads, in the quick movements of shoulders under mink and silver fox and—he'd have to ask Lucinda what that other fur was, black and tight and woolly. He felt the sanguine glow which meant, he was sure, that he had again fused these women, so many of them rather terrifying if he considered them separately, into what he called a spiritual sounding board against which his witticisms, his paradoxes, his bold statements had full effect. He grasped the reader's stand on which his notes lay, swinging himself up to tiptoe, he let his glance rest briefly on the face at the end of the second row, a slender, fragile face, almost an orchid tone in the hollows of the temples, under the cheekbones (or was it just the faint reflection of the placque of violets that canted toward one eyebrow on the bright hair), he did not really smile, he made his eyes prominent, see, I'm talking straight to you, you, Marie Estey. She tossed a hand

toward him, gaily, her rather long mouth with its full upper lip which had, in repose, a kind of petulance about it, curved in approval of him. "There you are," finished Hubert. "I need not explain further to such a group as this why taste, refinement, spiritual values, are important."

He sat down, and the chairman of the group bustled forward, with proper remarks about his splendid talk, with announcements of a contest for the garden group, and then, as the white-coated waiters were appearing at the rear of the room, she finished by saying that there could scarcely be any questions after such a complete handling of the subject. Hubert was sorry, he rather fancied himself as a skillful handler of questions, but he rose, as various members of the club moved forward to speak to him personally. A pleasant moment, full of congratulations, of small flutters about certain points he had made; he was masculine, assured, the center of interest, except perhaps for some of the members at the rear of the room, less intellectual, who had already turned to the plates of intricate sandwiches. Mrs. Estey had moved forward a trifle, she smiled at him between carefully waved heads and extraordinary hats; you were wonderful, her smile said, you are so patient now with women. Bending his dark head toward a plump, elderly woman, waiting for her to finish her inquiry, did he think they should have chosen an Englishwoman to play Scarlett O'Hara, he thought, Mrs. Estey will drive me to the train again, she said last week she would rescue me from my admirers; the perfection of those moments—sitting beside her in the limousine, the heavy monogrammed robe over their knees, the scent she wore a soft feminine note under the stronger odor of their cigarettes—was a fitting climax to the triumph of the afternoon.

And it was just chance that he was giving this series of talks, Professor Black coming down with the flu, and the doctor saying he must drop all extra work, and Black turning the program over to him. He'd been dismayed, he hadn't time to go in for much contemporary reading, but Lucinda, his wife, who read everything, had made notes for him, and they did need the extra money. He hadn't dreamed it would turn out so well. Really extraordinarily well. He was making contacts in a world outside the college, he could feel himself develop. Perhaps he wasn't exactly wonderful—Mrs. Estey was unusually sensitive in her response to him, she caught his finest points—but he certainly was doing pretty well. You've come a long way, my boy! A long way from that little middle-western village where you carried newspapers and delivered groceries after school and Saturday. A long, hard way, all by your own effort. Well, Lucinda had plugged for him, of course. She wasn't very keen about this lecture business. In fact, when he missed the train last week, because Mrs. Estey asked him to stop for a cocktail, Lucinda had been in a bad humor. Not that she made a scene, Lucinda never did that. But she had insulated herself in chilliness, she hadn't even asked how the lecture went, she'd said that if he prorated his lecture fee according to the time he was spending, he might better get a W.P.A. job. He hadn't wanted her to keep dinner waiting for him, he told her he'd stop at Childs', and she had said wouldn't the Plaza be more appropriate. He'd have to get that train tonight.

The plump woman was edged away in the middle of an emotional sentence by a younger woman bearing gifts, a plate, a saucer, a cup of coffee flanked by small sandwiches. He knew better than to try to eat; he'd been caught the first afternoon with his mouth full, and an eager inquirer waiting for his answer. He'd decided he couldn't even

listen with the proper air if his jaw moved up and down. He looked about for a place to deposit the china, and Mrs. Estey was at his side.

"I don't want to hurry you," she said, with a charming air of having a private knowledge of his plans, "but you did say you simply must get that train this afternoon. I don't wish any guilt on my poor head!" She took the plate, the coffee from his hand and set it boldly on the piano, Hubert's eye lingered a moment on a round sandwich, dollar-size, was that caviar? The secretary of the club in a Hussar hat of fur slipped a folded paper into his hand, the check, transferred hastily, mundane considerations should be kept secret, the afternoon had been on a higher plane; expertly, with a lazy grace in her movement, Mrs. Estey convoyed him down the long room, flipping gay remarks as she fended off the members whose questions burned unanswered. You mustn't impose upon him, he has a train to catch, next week— He collected a few tributes, one from a mink coat and a mink rosette on red hair, Your humor is so marvelous, Dr. Webster, so refreshing!

Mrs. Estey's limousine rolled up to the step as they appeared, in a kind of easeful magic, the liveried chauffeur opened the door, he spread the robe across their knees, he stood a moment for instructions.

"You don't really wish to catch that train, do you?" asked Mrs. Estey in her quick, light voice. "You certainly rate a cocktail after your performance. You must be exhausted!"

"I don't wish to, but I must." Hubert held a match to her cigarette, his eyes met hers intently. (Hers were a strange shade of blue, almost purple here in the dusk of the car's interior.) "If you knew—" he broke off as the

paper match scorched his thumb. How unpopular I was, he had started to say. The little burn on his thumb was like a pinch from Lucinda, don't you bring me into this! "I have an engagement tonight," he finished.

"The station, Andrews," said Mrs. Estey; the chauffeur closed the door, and settled behind the wheel, his side face, between the cap and the astrakhan collar of his coat, supercilious. (Because I have to take trains, thought Hubert, instead of riding around in my own Rolls Royce. Chauffeurs and butlers always made him uneasy, when, rarely, he encountered them. At least, my fine fellow, you're driving me now!) Hubert leaned forward a trifle, to be quite sure that there was glass between him and those rather large reddish ears.

"Yes, the window's closed." Mrs. Estey's laugh tinkled. "You can say anything, anything you like, he can't hear you!" Her eyelids drooped, with their accent of gray eye-shadow they seemed transparent, a thin veil tinged by the color of her eyes. "Not that you would have anything to say to poor me! Your life is so full, so important that you could not have time for an idle, useless woman. You're the kind of man who drives straight toward what he wishes, aren't you? But the interesting thing about you is that you're not brutal. Most strong men are brutal. You—" The eyelids swept up. "You're really sensitive, I can tell that. But I am saying too much. But it's so rarely that I do say what I feel, and I feel that you understand, and we have just these few minutes—"

"You aren't saying too much!" The limousine was a chariot, Hubert was a warrior with a poet's wreath of laurel on his brows, the early spring sunlight on the piles of melting snow along the road was the glitter of swords and the winding of a horn. "But you mustn't call yourself useless,

you are beautiful and sympathetic, what more could you want?" Hubert's heart quickened its beat under the double-breasted coat, dark blue with a hair-stripe, the first tailored suit he'd had since his marriage, bought on the strength of these lectures. He expanded inside his clothes; this was dangerous, magnificent, living! Mrs. Estey extinguished her cigarette in the ash tray in the padded arm where her elbow rested, her face drooping away from him.

"Is it enough?" She sighed. "I try to fill my days— You know, when I first saw you, I thought to myself, there is a man who has suffered! He would understand—a woman."

"Perhaps no man can fully understand," said Hubert, expanding still more. His head was bloody but unbowed, that was Hubert at that moment.

"I think you could." Mrs. Estey smiled at him, and under the robe her hand touched his knee. It set up a pleasant excitement in Hubert, and he slid his left hand slowly down to find hers. Hers curled into his, small, cool, a ring she wore much harder than the bones which must be hidden in the flexible fingers.

"'Your soft hand is a woman in itself,'" began Hubert, and then thought better of the rest of the quotation, "and mine the man's bared breast she lies within"; that might be going a little too far.

"We could be such friends," she said, "if only you were less important—"

The car had stopped, beside the dingy suburban station, the chauffeur dismounted, and opened the door. Mrs. Estey withdrew her hand, with a soft pressure of her thumb against Hubert's palm, and snapped open her platinum cigarette case.

"Get me an evening paper, Andrews," she said. "We'll sit here till the train comes."

"It's coming, Madam," said Andrews, and his eyes, in-

specting Hubert briefly, were expressionless as those of any fish. "I can hear it at the crossing." He stood at attention, holding the door ajar.

"The paper," said Mrs. Estey, and he went slowly toward the station. "Would you ever have time"—she stopped, as Hubert again held a match for her, the flame lighting the concave planes of her face—"I tell you, you might dine with us, yes? Would you? Have you any evening free? Friday? Would Friday do? Oh, marvelous! At eight! I'll drop you a note, or you would never remember!"

Hubert stepped backward out of the car, the train ground to a standstill behind him, a ruthless compulsion in its sound. He tucked his portfolio under his left elbow, he held out his right hand, hers touched it. "Friday," she said. "I'll send Andrews for you, there's a train—"

Hubert settled himself on a wicker seat in the coach, a little harshly, as the train jerked. Did they have wicker because it was more sanitary, or because it applied friction so you didn't slide around with the gyrations of the train, he wondered. Not many people heading for New York at this time of day, a few women, definitely on the dowdy side, none of the perfection of grooming, of breeding. The difference between a Rolls Royce and a day-coach. It wasn't just the mink coat, it was an essence, an avatar of sophistication. Even if he could buy mink for Lucinda, she wouldn't have that essence. Of course she had real character, he didn't mean that. But he didn't wish to think about Lucinda now, he opened his portfolio, started to remove a book, and then stopped, his fingers moving slowly over the worn brown leather. From that point until the train rumbled to a standstill in the Pennsylvania station, Hubert went on with the conversation between Mrs. Estey and himself. He grew bolder, wittier, more understanding, he was in the middle of a scene of passionate renunciation

when he had to leave the train, and the homegoing mob on the subway into which he wedged himself left no room for a dream, reduced him to an automaton of packed endurance.

Broadway, when he disentangled himself from the jostling crowd on the subway stairs, and emerged, an individual again, had in the twilight-softened glow of lights—neon signs, moving headlights of traffic, lighted shop windows—the curious leisurely aspect of a village street. Hubert stood a moment at the subway exit, wondering why he should think, suddenly of the little town in which he had grown up. This first warm day, unseasonably warm for March, had drawn people out of their winter lairs, had coaxed them into loitering; groups of men lingered at the drugstore corner, instead of ducking into icy winds and hurrying home; shop girls stood in front of the moving picture house, reading the scraps of dialogue under the pictured scenes; small boys shouted in a side street instead of rushing for warm rooms and supper. It's that first hint of spring, thought Hubert, people smell it even in city streets, they relax, feeling the earth under the pavements. Winter wasn't over, not by a long shot, but the air had hope that it would be done with before many weeks. He walked homeward slowly, and by the time he had reached the entrance to the apartment house, he had decided that the interest Mrs. Estey stirred in him was not a romantic spring fever. She was a charming woman, certainly there was no lack of loyalty to Lucinda in his appreciation of her, marriage need not eliminate all friendship, need it?

As he waited for the elevator, he was more acutely aware of the stuffy dinginess of the small hall than he had been since the day in August when Lucinda had conducted him proudly here to exhibit the apartment her search had at last unearthed, an apartment with sunlight in the two front rooms, with a bedroom for the two boys, another for him

and Lucinda, and two extra rooms, one off the kitchen where Lucinda could have her sewing machine and her typewriter table, and another, with folding doors between it and the living-room-dining-room, which Hubert could use for his study. "It's marvelous for the money!" Her cheeks had been pink with delight. "Because it's one of the old houses, railroad apartments, they call them, and they haven't made it over into small apartments yet. The boys' room is far enough away from the front so they won't bother you when you want to work, and I can smell the potatoes if they boil dry while I'm reading proof!" He could smell cabbage, onions, and the stale, hoarded warmth of the unaired hall, he ground his heel into the rubber runner, spread that morning against feet that walked in slush, he frowned at the switchboard in the corner, where the light from a small metal-shaded goose-neck lamp shone on a pulp detective story magazine and a litter of scraps of paper on which messages were scrawled in Joe's crude writing. What a setting, he thought. What would Marie Estey think of it—or Andrews! "You can always use your university address," Lucinda had said, "and it will be wonderful to have sun and a little air and almost room enough for all of us!" The buzzer on the switchboard plucked at his nerves with its intermittent, peremptory signal; the elevator creaked behind the door with its imitation grain-ing, the door whanged open, and Joe, the lanky elevator boy, doorman, telephone operator, and porter, dashed past Hubert and angled himself over the mouthpiece at the board. Hubert had to wait until he had shifted the plugs, taken a message, fished out a package from the niche behind the switchboard, and dashed back into the car.

"Evening, Mr. Webster. Package for Mrs. Webster." The car lurched up toward the fifth floor, and Hubert inspected the package. Proof, rush, Mrs. Hubert K. Webster.

Lucinda was getting a good deal of work from that publisher. She was accurate and swift, but it was too bad she'd had to take to wearing glasses all the time lately. He hoped she'd give him a good mark for catching that train, she knew it meant leaving the instant he finished his speech.

He stood a moment outside the door of the apartment, feeling for his keys. One pocket, another, another. He'd forgotten them when he put on this suit; he didn't wear it every day to college, the blue one was quite good enough, Lucinda said. He moved his fingers along the door jamb, the light near the elevator shed no rays as far as this, and found the button, pressed it, squaring his shoulders. There is a gradual process which deep sea divers and sandhogs in tunnel-digging use, by which they come back to common air on the earth's surface. In a way, Hubert felt the need of that process, the plunge into the domestic interior from the afternoon was too abrupt, the train trip had not been an intermediate stage because he had spent it in an extension of the afternoon.

He heard the boys tearing down the long inner hall, shrieking, he took a backward step as they thumped against the door, cradling one arm around package and portfolio.

"Hi, Dad!" Two eels, or one octopus, they were at him: Arthur, the older, and Gray, the younger, wrestling with each other, pummeling him. "I won the bet! I bet it was you!" Gray thrust his tongue through the gap in his upper teeth, he grabbed the parcel, tossing it, catching it. "Arthur said he'd bet you'd stay for a drink!"

Hubert tried to hold himself with dignity, tried to stalk past them into the hall, but he had one on each side, yammering, and he pinned an arm around each pair of shoulders, skinny and solid, and tunked the heads together. "Take that, you Indians!" His portfolio slid to the floor, whacking his toes, and Gray reached for it. The three of

them, arm in arm, stopped at the kitchen door, the first door after you entered the apartment.

"Hello," said Hubert. Lucinda, a green smock buttoned over her dark dress, stood at the gas stove, inspecting kettles. Her spectacles had steamed a little, he couldn't see her eyes through them, her hair, drawn back into a knot at the nape of the neck—just as she had worn it when he first saw her, how many years ago, sitting on the front row in a class for which he was term-reader—had little fine ends standing up, curling against her temples, her face was intent, absorbed. She waved a spoon.

"Why, Hubert! You *are* home early!"

"Something smells good." He waited a moment, but she was too busy to look at him again, and he moved along the hall, stopping at the coat closet.

"Listen, Dad," began Gray, and Arthur yelled, "Now you wait! You said you wouldn't ask him right off—"

"Give me a minute to clean up." Hubert hung his coat over a wire hanger, tossed his hat onto the shelf, shut the door. "After all, I've had quite a day." He edged into the bathroom, and closed the door against them. Outside was a lively scuffle, a yell from Gray, and then Lucinda's voice from down the hall, very firm.

"See here, boys, pipe down! Remember what I said, no movie this week if you get us complained of again!"

"Just a bunch of softies," said Gray, "mind a little racket like that."

"A pack of wild horses, Mrs. Miller told the superintendent," said Lucinda.

"She oughta hear me really be a wild horse!" Gray made a noise intended for the neighing of a horse. Arthur said, "Aw, shut up, you want us thrown out on the street?" Then the boys apparently withdrew into their own room, and the

noise subsided into what, for them, was a fairly quiet argument.

An apartment was no place for a brace of boys, thought Hubert, drying his hands. Had to sit on them all the time. He and Lucinda had discussed taking a small house in New Jersey, it was really a part of New York now the George Washington Bridge had been opened. They had spent one Sunday looking around, driven briskly from one house to another by an energetic real estate agent, and ending at the Hesslers for tea. Hessler was in psychology, he had built a house, English, beamed and stuccoed, and set about with small unhealthy evergreens. "The children are all in college now," Mrs. Hessler had said, "but they had such a happy childhood here!"

"But did you?" Lucinda had asked, with intensity which Hubert knew was a sign that she had been making up her mind. Mrs. Hessler had lifted her face behind her tray of silver tea-things, a face colorless except for the bister circles around the pale blue eyes, a face too small an apex for the thickened, inert body disclosed unkindly by the dark blue knitted suit; her hands, the knuckles lost in pale flesh, made a bewildered gesture among the shining silver. "I mean—" Lucinda laughed. "Did you like it yourself? Staying out here?"

"There are always compensations, I think. Of course we didn't have a car at first, and the trip into town was harder then, trolleys and ferry and subway, you know. But you look so strong, Mrs. Webster."

"Mrs. Hessler has never been strong," said Mr. Hessler, proudly. "And there's always the problem of the children, can you trust a maid to stay with them?"

"It's all I can do to get Hubert to his nine o'clock classes now," persisted Lucinda.

"It's hard in bad weather," admitted Mr. Hessler; he

was a dapper little man, moving agilely to pass the tea his wife poured. "But I solved that problem, I have always kept a room in town, just a *pied-à-terre*, you know. When I have an early class, or some late function, I just hole in there. And now of course we have our home, instead of having supported a landlord all these years."

Hubert remembered how silent Lucinda had been as they walked the few blocks to the corner where they could stop the bus for New York. The New Jersey countryside had been beautiful that spring evening, with dim blue shadows in the hollows of the hills, and he had made several comments, such as, Better air out here, the boys could even keep a dog, couldn't they? I could mow the lawn. He had lapsed into silence himself, you couldn't talk forever to a mummy. And as they rode across the bridge, with the castellated lights of the city curving down toward the lower bay under the haze-dimmed sky, Lucinda had suddenly cried out, "*Pied-à-terre!* If you think I'm going to be marooned in the country while you have all this! No wonder she's an invalid, what else did she have to do?"

"But you could get in town easily," he had urged, "and the children—"

"Our feet stay on the same ground, Hubert darling. I'm sure the schools are better in the city, and I can keep them healthy. I think I want them to be city children, it's a wonderful place, they're smart boys, it's where their future is."

There was no arguing with Lucinda, once she reached a decision; he couldn't think of arguments that didn't demand more from her than from him. She would be less accessible for the work which several publishing houses were sending to her, she probably couldn't get around to the art exhibitions, the occasional University party— But he still felt an apartment was no place for growing boys. He had never admitted to himself that Hessler's room in town,

where he could separate himself for a night from his family, was like a sly finger beckoning.

"Hubert, dinner's on, what *are* you doing?" Lucinda spoke just outside the door. "You aren't sick?"

Hubert unlocked the door. "Certainly not. I'm coming." (You see, I can't even wash my hands—)

Lucinda had taken off her smock, she moved quickly ahead of him along the hall, a sure grace in the carriage of her figure, slim, nicely curved in the dark wool dress. Hubert caught up with her, slid an arm about her waist, poked a kiss at her, which landed near her ear. She rolled her eyes at him, he could see them now, she had wiped her glasses clear; they were bright and inquiring, the pupils expanded until the blue iris was just a line around the dark center.

"Well, I made the train today," he said.

She smiled, a shadowy dimple flickering in her cheek, and Hubert thought, Lord, that's the way she grins at Gray when he boasts!

"I wanted dinner on time," she said, "because there's a grand picture right down here at the nearest movie house. 'You Can't Take It With You,' you know, the Pulitzer play we didn't see. Tonight's the last night, I didn't know it was there Sunday." She waited a moment for Arthur to draw back her chair, the boy was learning to do that pretty well now, and seated herself.

"Aw, Mother, can't we go too?" Gray plumped into his chair, jarring the table.

"Not on a week-day night."

Hubert sat down, unfolding his napkin, tasting the soup, an excellent clear soup with a dash of sherry. Lucinda had imagination in her cooking. The yellow cloth was pleasant with the white china against it, the black bowl with artificial nasturtiums (from the ten-cent store) made a gay

center. "I don't see how I can go tonight," he said, slowly. "I've a batch of papers to read."

"I marked them for you this afternoon," said Lucinda, "and made notes for you."

"Oh, boy, some soup!" Gray smacked his lips. "Mother, I'll go with you, listen, I got my homework all done."

"Like fun you have," said Arthur. "All wrong, the way you did—"

"Snitch-bug, snitch-lug!" Gray thrust the tip of his tongue through the gap in the upper row of teeth. "Snitch—"

"Hush, boys," Lucinda spoke absently, out of habit, not looking at them at all. Her eyes were on Hubert's face, eagerly. "We've just been waiting for that picture, it's such fun!"

"I want to see it, too, but how can I handle that class without knowing something about what they've done? They aren't like undergraduates, they're school ma'ams, principals, they keep right after you."

"Last week you didn't—" Lucinda broke off, her mouth had a moment of unhappiness, a tremulousness in the upper curved lip, before she set it firmly. She rose, turning away from Hubert to pick up a tray from the small table at her side. "It's your turn, Arthur," she said.

"No sir," said Gray, loudly, "last week you didn't come back for hours and hours, and we waited dinner an' everything!"

Hubert made a movement which would have been a flounce if he had worn skirts and had room between his knees and the table leg.

"Who asked you what you thought?" asked Arthur, jumping up to collect the emptied soup bowls and place them on the tray.

"You'd think I gave this course of lectures to amuse my-

self," said Hubert, icily. Lucinda lifted her eyebrow, and disappeared with the tray, Arthur at her heels. "I take on extra work to make more money for you—"

Gray wriggled in his chair, he leaned forward on his elbows, his face twisted into what he meant for an ingratiating smile. "That's what I wanted to ask you, Dad. One of the fellows in our school takes riding lessons in the Park. Gee, it's swell, he says. A fellow ought to know how to ride, didn't he? It doesn't cost much, a coupla bucks a week, Art said we couldn't afford it, but I said you had more money now, and I—"

"Wouldn't you like me to buy a horse, two horses?"

"You don't haveta buy 'em— Aw, gee, Dad!"

Arthur came into the room, his face earnest above the laden tray, which he set down on the small table, letting his breath out, everything safe, not a drop spilled. Lucinda followed, bearing the platter of meat balls, lemony, oniony, mushroomy. Hubert sniffed. "Mushrooms?"

"I found them, you know, that Italian place on Amsterdam. Twenty cents a pound because they were a little brown. But they really were good."

Hubert had gone one Saturday with Lucinda to the Italian place on Amsterdam, he had seen the little dark man come running to greet Lucinda. Ah, good morn', Mees Webstair, what you want, I got the good finochi, the good broccoli. Good morn', Professor Webstair. She not like other ladies, on the telephone, she come, she see what I got, I give her always the best bargain!

"Dad, you don't haveta buy a horse," Gray's voice was imperative. "You just pay for—"

"I just pay for your school, and that's enough," said Hubert. "Your son has delusions of grandeur," he went on, as Lucinda added the vegetable dishes to the platter in front of him. "Wants to ride."

"I'd like to, too," said Lucinda, seating herself. "But we can't. We walk, we Websters."

Gray subsided, his glance wavering from his father to his mother. Arthur moved cautiously around the table, refilling the water glasses from the green water pitcher. He whispered something as he passed Gray, but Hubert, arranging meat balls and cauliflower and beans on the plates, did not hear what he said. Lucinda had sealed her face again, it was composed, noncommittal. Of course she wanted to see that picture, they always waited until the plays they should have seen were made into movies, and then they waited until the movies left the downtown houses and moved onto the circuit which eventually landed them on upper Broadway. They had decided pictures were really more satisfying than the last rows in the balcony at the theater. That one time, their tenth wedding anniversary, when he had bought orchestra seats for a Eugene O'Neill play, and Lucinda had cried after they had come home. "I never knew before that actors use their faces, too!" But he was worried about this Wednesday class, it had suffered from his Tuesday lectures, it was pretty damned important. What did she mean, We walk, we Websters?

"What time is the show, Lucinda?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"I might have time after we came home—"

"It wouldn't be any fun, since you don't want to go."

"Of course I want to go! But you know how those graduate students are, carping, demanding, they'd cut your heart out and eat it to get what you've got, you know, the way primitive tribes eat their brave enemies, the department's watching this class; in a way my promotion, our future depends on it!"

"If they cut your heart out you'd be dead!" said Gray, admiringly.

"You're telling me!" said Lucinda, inelegantly. "We won't say another word about it."

Hubert didn't like the expression in her eyes; they were bright and hard as a bird's. He was unhappy, in spite of the comforting flavor of the meat balls. He'd made the wrong turning in this discussion, just why he didn't know. When Lucinda said she'd read all those papers, he should have said thanks, that leaves me free to go with you. A foreshadow of discomfort about that dinner with Mrs. Estey on Friday—Lord, how ever would he explain that, now?—had made him try to insist upon his diligence, his toil for his family. Was that it? "It was good of you to read those papers," he ventured. "How bad were they?"

"So-so." Lucinda wouldn't be pleasant about it. He hated the kind of ostracism she practiced on him lately. "I'd go by myself," she said, thoughtfully. "I don't mind ordinarily. Only it's a comedy, and I think you feel silly laughing all alone. Did you ever consider that? You can cry very comfortably alone, in fact you'd rather be alone so you can cry to your heart's content, but it's not easy to laugh out loud to yourself. Did you ever notice that, Arthur?"

"I don't cry at a movie," said Arthur, his fine brow and blue eyes quiet with reflection. He and Lucinda were a good deal alike, they carried on endless discussions about the most extraordinary things. "And anyway, Gray's always along. He does give me a punch when it's funny, or I whack him, and then we laugh harder. Mickey Mouse."

"We laugh when they get to kissing, too!" Gray made a loud noise, a burlesque of a kiss.

"Exactly," said Lucinda, cryptically.

"When you're scared, you like to grab somebody."

Arthur was still reflective. "Like the 'Hurricane' picture."

"Yes, you do. But tragedy and sentiment are lonely things." Lucinda rose, picking up the tray again, and Arthur sat very still, storing her words in a corner where he would later take them out and look at them again.

"That's really an interesting point," said Hubert, but Lucinda didn't glance at him at all as she began to clear away the dishes.

Indian pudding was the last course, golden and fine-textured. "I had to stretch the cream with milk," said Lucinda, "but we've had calories enough. And vitamins."

Gray had a story he had read in school, about a man who said if you ate all of a raw fish you didn't need another thing. He and Arthur argued as to whether you ate the bones too, and the discussion lasted until the pudding was gone. Then Lucinda practically shoved Hubert into the study. "You can get right to work. I'll bring your coffee in there, and shut the doors tight. You won't hear us one bit." She clicked the French doors shut so quickly that Hubert had to jump back. He stared at the dull blue silk shirred onto rods that covered the glass, shrugged, and walked to the flat desk on which books and papers were stacked. In the middle of the blotter lay a pile of manuscripts, forty-odd, and beside them a pile of small filing cards, each neatly typed. He read one or two: Brown, fair material, badly arranged, style redundant, pedantic. Curtis, empty, repetitious, not an original thought. Cuyler—Hubert sat down, his lip caught between his teeth, his hands restless, slapping the papers into an even pile, picking up a pencil, drawing circles on the top card. She must have spent hours—When she came in with the coffee, he'd make amends, he'd persuade her to let him go with her to her movie. But it was Arthur who unlatched the doors and entered, with a small black lacquer tray, on which sat a

squat Italian coffee jug, a crimson pottery cup and saucer, a yellow bowl with lumps of sugar, and a blue cream pitcher. He waited for Hubert to move a few books, and then placed the tray at his father's elbow. "Three cups," he said. "That'll keep you awake all right."

"Arthur, tell your mother—" Hubert stopped. Arthur had looked over his shoulder, as he stood in the crack between the doors, with eyes so like Lucinda's, blue and bright and momentarily hard, that Hubert couldn't go on. "Nothing," he said, testily, pouring out coffee. The doors clicked shut again.

Hubert drank coffee. He followed the series of noises which came somewhat muffled through the doors, he knew when the drop leaves of the table, department store maple, a copy of an early American type, were let down, when Arthur at one end and Lucinda at the other set the table in its place against the wall, spread the strip of tapestry over it, placed the row of books, several in brown paper jackets, the University subscription reading library books, between the book-ends of hammered copper (made in the manual arts course by Arthur for Christmas last year) set two chairs, one at each end of the table, and by carrying the other two chairs down the hall to the boys' room, turned the dining room back into the living room. Then the apartment was quiet, except for a radio which boomed subterraneously, the complaining Millers beneath them didn't mind running their radio full blast from eight in the morning until midnight. Hubert usually could ignore it, but tonight a political speech nagged at him. He tried to concentrate. He thought, Lucinda knows I never go to movies through the week, she must have planned this on purpose, because I was late last week, I don't know what's wrong— Phrases of the afternoon drifted across his mind, far pleasanter than his present thoughts. I must speak

about Friday, before she makes some other plan. He squirmed inside his clothes; she wouldn't like it, he could taste the very flavor of her disapproval.

He tried to concentrate on the papers. Lucinda knew he couldn't work well when she was down on him! The atmosphere in a man's home had a great deal to do with his success, of course you could rise above it, but then you used energy you should use for your work. Lucinda wanted him to succeed, but she wasn't always considerate, especially lately. He'd ask her if she wasn't feeling well, it couldn't be— Oh, Lord, no! They decided definitely they couldn't afford another child. It wasn't that. Hubert started on the first paper; he'd read through a few, just to check on Lucinda's comments. Now look at this afternoon, how well he'd spoken, just because he knew he had a sympathetic audience. It made all the difference in the world!

He filled his coffee cup again. Not a sound in the apartment. He went quietly to the doors, and plucked back the edge of the opaque silk curtain. No one in the living room, Lucinda should have finished the dishes by this time. Sighing, he returned to his desk. He had to hand it to her, she did a good job of criticism. A good job. He drew triangles and circles on the blotter, thinking unexpectedly of the good job she had been offered the year they had fallen in love. An instructorship in an Ohio college. Just a beginning, the head of the department had said; you'll go far. All Hubert had then was a teaching fellowship, while he finished the work for his doctorate. Half the continent between them! And Lucinda hadn't hesitated a moment. "I like the job you offer better," she had said. Hubert's ears burned. He hadn't thought about that spring for a long time. The strong scent of Balm of Gilead trees in Morningside Park— Lucinda had said she'd find some kind of teaching in New York, but Arthur interfered with that.

Hubert got up again, and walked to the doors. No one in the living room. Probably Lucinda was sitting in the boys' room, subduing them to their homework. She'd never regretted her decision, he thought. Of course the reading she did for publishers was interesting, although it didn't pay well. She evidently meant to leave him severely alone. He settled again to his papers.

But the subject matter had no power to hold him, not tonight. Methods of teaching English in the secondary school. Pretty monotonous. No scope. Not much inspiration in the students. Dowdy women, country school principals with Adam's apples and red wrists, living in cramped rooms, eating in cafeterias, plodding toward a degree in order to impress some village school board. Hubert understood them, his own beginnings had been like theirs, in a way what he had achieved, was achieving, marked the golden goal of which each of them might dream, and for the most part their envy and respect sustained him. Tonight—he wondered whether he ought not to branch out more. Lecture tours. All over the country. There were lecture bureaus to handle such things. He'd been damned successful with this first venture. Town Halls, public auditoriums, crowds of intelligent men and women—why, look at the way English authors came over and collected enormous fees for just such work! It stirred a man's imagination, meeting people outside the academic world, people like—well, like Mrs. Estey. He could travel (whirling through the night in a modern sleeping compartment, met at the station by a committee), he could expand his horizon. He might publish, too; he'd thought of writing out these lectures, polishing them. Perhaps Lucinda would help with that part, since she'd read all the books. He might tell Mrs. Estey. I'm going off on a tour next fall, I'm not sure I can repeat the series of talks I've given out here. He

would tell her; she would understand his vaulting ambition. Lucinda wouldn't approve. He knew exactly what she would say. Stick to your last, Hubert. Secretly, she would resent his absence from home, his traveling, his encounter with new people. She would say that his college work was more important, not realizing that like most women she wished to hold him in a familiar groove.

Perhaps in spite of the coffee Hubert dozed a little; his head jerked heavily forward, and he shook himself upright, looking about suspiciously. The apartment was still quiet, his wrist watch seemed to have just one upright hand. Good Heavens, it was twelve o'clock! He stretched himself up to his feet, arranged the papers in a neat pile, snapped an elastic band around the neatly typed cards. He couldn't work any longer tonight. Sometimes Lucinda came in, before she went to bed, with sandwiches and Ovaltine for him, and they chatted a while. He felt hollow, but he put aside the notion of investigating the refrigerator. He would just go to bed with quiet dignity, not showing that he knew Lucinda's mood.

The hall was cold. The boys had left their door open, and the cold wind from their window had chilled the whole place. He listened a moment but they were so deep in sleep they did not seem to breathe at all; he could see them, not distinctly, from the night-light in the hall: Gray spread-eagled, a jumping jack with all the strings relaxed, and Arthur, reticent even in sleep, curled on one side, his back to the light. Hubert pulled the door softly to and latched it. His room—and Lucinda's—was dark; he hesitated a moment, peered into the bathroom, sometimes Lucinda hung his pajamas and bathrobe on the door. Not tonight. He'd have to turn on a light, although he preferred not to wake her. When he found the button and pressed it, he stared, his mouth sagging open, amazed, his eyes round.

Then he rounded the foot of his bed, and stood beside Lucinda's, touching it. No dark head on the pillow, no soft braid with the tiny bow of red ribbon across the sheet, no Lucinda!

She might have told him she was going out! He didn't even know which theater— He looked again at his wrist watch. After midnight. No movie ran that late. Apprehension, which runs so closely parallel to anger that it sets up the same vibration in the nerves, prickled in his throat, in the pit of his stomach. She's doing it on purpose, he thought. I won't worry, I'll go calmly to bed. But as he undressed, as he ran water for a bath, he listened for the click of a key in the apartment door. She'd have her purse, there'd be something in it to identify her— He toweled himself fiercely, stepped into pajama trousers and dashed along the hall to the coat closet. Her winter coat hung there, the little buttonhole bouquet of artificial cornflowers gay on the worn fur collar. "I can make it do another winter," she had said, and then went running around in that light coat. The blue flowers winked at him, or had he blinked, swallowing hard? He stared at the neat hat-boxes on the shelf; he couldn't tell whether she'd worn a hat or not. She might have gone around the corner to the Camp-ton's'. He didn't like to telephone at such an hour. He went slowly to the door of the boys' room. He might wake Arthur and ask him. Why the devil hadn't the boys come to say good night? Something queer about the way they'd crept to bed. Nothing's happened to her, she's trying to show you! Just what, he didn't analyze. He'd go to bed, he'd shut his eyes against the slow images, too like the pictures in a tabloid, that moved through his head.

But instead of going to bed, he walked to the outer door and opened it a crack. He could hear the rumble of the elevator down the hall, and poised for immediate retreat in

case it stopped at this floor. It didn't. He sniffed the damp, yellow-soapy smell of the hall; the night man was making his mopping rounds. Hubert shivered and closed the door. If he caught cold, having to stand around like this after a bath, whose fault would that be? He stopped at the bathroom for his bathrobe, and tied the cord hard around the discomfort in his middle. Lucinda had made him the bathrobe for Christmas, out of an Indian blanket; she'd been very funny about the time she'd had, both sleeves cut for one arm, all the sewing machine needles breaking when she tried to stitch the red leather binding. It was just like one she'd seen in an Abercrombie catalogue. Hubert twisted at the sleeve. He'd said it fitted perfectly, but it didn't. Caught him at the elbow. He'd worn the robe all day Christmas, the boys had called him Chief Big Words (and he hadn't quite liked that name!), he had tied a quill from an old hat of Lucinda's to his head and danced the war dance. Lucinda, who loved holidays and birthdays and celebrations, had been gay and delightful all day, much more like herself than she had for weeks before, her cheeks flushed from pleasure or from watching the turkey. Then the very next day there had been that unpleasant moment about the Christmas card from Marie Estey. He had tried to slip it out of sight, just to avoid comment, and that had been a mistake. Lucinda had read the line written inside the gold and crimson folder, under the engraved name. "You are *so* inspiring!" and had said, "Well, I'm glad I'm that good." Hubert should just have laughed, of course, but somehow he couldn't. Even if Lucinda had done work on the lectures, certainly he had some share in their success. Unfortunately he had said, "You don't think you'd have the same results if you delivered them, do you?" Lucinda's retort had been more than double-edged. "Thank God, no!"

Hubert stamped down the hall to the boys' room, his anxiety rubbed into fine exasperation by all the friction he remembered. He pushed open their door, he laid his hand on Arthur's shoulder, trying to keep his voice low, not to startle him too suddenly awake. "Arthur, are you awake?" He could feel the change in the slight muscles under his fingers. "Listen, Arthur, where did your mother go?"

Gray muttered in his sleep, he waved his arms, and slept again. Arthur opened his eyes, very dark in his sleep-pale face. "What?"

"Where did your mother go? Why didn't you tell me—"

Arthur rolled away from his father's hand, digging his head into the pillow. "Movie," he said. "She said we shouldn't disturb you. We promised we'd be still as mice."

Hubert straightened his back. He didn't believe Arthur had gone to sleep again, but he couldn't shake him, say, see here, I'm half crazy, can't you wake up? He ought not to frighten them, not yet. He'd get his clothes on, he'd have to make some move. He shivered again; across the court sounded the plangent notes of organ music, some insomniac's radio. He drew the door softly shut behind him, and heard, then, the sound of a key turning cautiously in the lock. He measured the distance to his own room. He hadn't time to conceal himself, he drew himself up with dignity, and felt a terrific thumping against his ribs.

Lucinda stopped as she saw him, her eyebrows arching. "Hello, you still up?" She fastened the night latch, and came along the hall as far as the cloak closet, yawning, the back of her hand over her mouth. She pulled off the blue beret, she shook herself out of the tweed coat, and hung them away, as nonchalantly as if nothing had happened!

"Where—" Hubert tried to keep his voice pitched low, but it shot out, catapulted from his turmoil. "Do you know it's past one?"

"Is it?" Lucinda opened her purse, spun the key on its chain a moment, and dropped it inside. She stretched herself a little, and breathed out a long, lazy sigh, aftermath of laughter; her face was relaxed, unconcerned. "I really didn't notice, we had such a grand time."

"You gave me a grand time!"

"Why, Hubert!" She came a few steps toward him, her smile looked backward over the evening, it wasn't for him at all. "I didn't suppose you'd notice I had gone out. You weren't worried, were you?"

Hubert moved his lips, the cords of his throat ached, he didn't dare speak. He stalked past her into their bedroom, stripped off the bathrobe, plumped himself into bed, turning his head away from the table light.

"I'll take my things in the bathroom." Lucinda moved quietly about the room, quietly, quickly, opening the window, turning down her blankets, snapping off the light. Hubert kneaded a fist against the mattress, he churned with unworded reproaches. Presently Lucinda came back, tiptoeing in slippers, pretending she thought he was asleep. The fragrance of something, lotion, cream, drifted past Hubert as she tucked herself into bed. He waited, listening to the soft sounds she made as she settled herself. He knew how she lay there on her side, curled a little, the way Arthur slept. Good God, wasn't she even going to answer his question? He tried to ask it again, naturally, where have you been, but the words pressed up against the top of his head and wouldn't be spoken. Then, unmistakably, she giggled.

"What *are* you laughing at?"

"Aren't you asleep yet? Just something I remembered—in the picture."

"What picture lasts till morning?"

"Oh, we stopped for food—and drink! We'd laughed

till we were hollow." Lucinda gave another long, reminiscent sigh, and said no more.

Hubert didn't sleep well the few hours left till seven. Every time he woke up, he planned what he would say to Lucinda in the morning, a dignified remonstrance, a courteous protest. Would you mind leaving word the next time you plan a carousal, is it too much for a man to ask where his wife is, and who her companions are, after all—

He had such a bad night that he didn't hear Lucinda get up, he didn't even hear the boys until Gray burst into the room. "Hey, Dad, time to crawl out, the bathroom's clear, you gotta step on it if you make your nine o'clock. Hey, lookit, Dad, I can walk on my hands." Legs in the air, Gray wobbled a few seconds, and came down smartly on his rear, his heels knocking dents in the chest of drawers. He felt gingerly of his behind, grinning.

"Gray!" Lucinda called. "Breakfast is ready."

They breakfasted in the window corner of the kitchen, too small for four people, but the boys ate first. By the time Hubert had shaved and dressed (he left the door ajar, and heard the gay chatter, feeling gloomily like an outsider in his own house; Lucinda was telling them about the picture), they were out of the kitchen, clattering around in their own room. They took care of it themselves, which was hard on Arthur, since he had a feeling for orderliness which Gray lacked. Your wives will thank me some day, Lucinda always said, as she trained them in various domestic tasks. Remembering that, Hubert picked up the towels he had dropped, and spread them over the edge of the tub, screwed the top back on the tube of shaving cream, and dabbed at the splashed bowl with a washcloth.

His breakfast was set at his place, the morning paper folded neatly, lay on the white and red oilcloth, and on that, bits of black headlines showing around them, a few

letters. Lucinda, in her green smock, looked in from the adjoining room, the maid's room she used for her work. She had a smudge from carbon paper on her nose, her spectacles magnified her eyes.

"If you want anything, sing out," she said. "I have to rush this report, you know, that manuscript you brought in last night."

Hubert looked at her, and did not say, why didn't you read it last night, then. He drank his orange juice, fingering over the letters. Trade letters from the college department of publishing houses, offering texts. A plea for fellowships for Chinese refugees, another for German refugees, a request for contributions to a fund for homeless boys. And at the bottom of the pile—now, had Lucinda placed it there?—an orchid tinted envelop, addressed to Professor Hubert Ketcham Webster, in the fine purple scrawl of Marie Estey. Hubert opened it.

DEAR PROFESSOR WEBSTER,

This is just a note to confirm the dinner engagement for Friday of this week. I knew that with all the important matters you have in your life, you would never remember such a trifling thing. But I am looking forward to the evening. Sincerely,

MARIE ESTEY.

Sincerely yours, thought Hubert. And then, I didn't explain about that dinner, if I don't this morning, I'm sure to get in wrong. He poured coffee, added cream and sugar, tasted the scrambled eggs. Strengthened he said, "Oh, Lucinda!"

"Yes." The typewriter tapped busily another line or two, and Lucinda came to the door.

Hubert pointed to the note with his fork, and went on with the eggs.

"I wanted to tell you last night," he said, "but I really didn't have a chance. Mrs. Estey is giving a dinner at her home."

Lucinda took off her spectacles, rubbing at them with a bit of Kleenex from her smock pocket. Her face, without them, was momentarily unguarded, defenseless.

"Hubert—I haven't a thing to wear—that black lace—it's in shreds this last time I had it cleaned—"

Hubert lifted his coffee cup, he felt his face glow crimson. He gulped coffee, and spoke.

"It's just a professional dinner, Lucy. You—that is—you don't have to go—that is—"

Lucinda stared a moment, and then slipped her spectacles into place.

"You mean she didn't ask me?"

"It's just—to arrange about next year, you know. I have just one more lecture this year, they want to talk things over."

"Does she know you've got a wife?"

"Of course! This isn't like an ordinary social engagement. Anyway, they're much too sophisticated to invite people in couples, when they don't know them, you see."

"I see," said Lucinda. Her upper lip trembled, and she laid a finger against it for a second, leaving another smudge. "Marriage is rather provincial, isn't it?"

"I won't go, if you feel so strongly—"

"But you've already accepted, haven't you?"

"I didn't know you'd take it this way. I don't know what's got into you lately."

"I see you don't." Lucinda turned back toward her room. "What night is it?" She stood in the doorway, moving one hand along the painted wood, poking at a blister with her forefinger, her smock crumpled.

"Friday."

"This very Friday?" Her hand stopped its motion, her head tipped back a little. Hubert wished he could see her face.

"Yes. You—you hadn't planned anything, had you? At least, you hadn't told me—" Lucinda did not move. "Had you?"

"No. Not a thing." Lucinda went into her room, something wooden, stiff-kneed about the few steps Hubert could watch. Or did he just imagine it, being in the supersensitive state of undeserved guilt? He didn't want any more breakfast, he'd probably have indigestion trying to eat. A fine send-off for a hard day! He went gloomily along the hall to his study, hearing Lucinda's typing, she wasn't the least disturbed. Queer, all these years together, he'd never realized before that Lucinda had this strong possessive sense. All women had it. Until now, nothing had evoked it, he'd led such a circumscribed life. He closed the doors. Lucinda had already been in here, the desk had been dusted, the coffee tray removed, ash tray emptied, window opened a few inches. He walked across to close it, and looked out a moment at the dingy gray of apartment houses across the street. A dull morning. He could hear fog-horns from the river.

He packed his briefcase with papers, Lucinda's cards, books. He thought, I must answer Mrs. Estey's note, I can't ask Lucinda what kind of paper I ought to use. He rummaged in a drawer, and decided a sheet of college paper would have to do; he started, "Dear Mrs. Estey, Thank you for your note, I, too, am looking forward to Friday evening," he covered the sheet hastily with a blotter at a knock on the door. Gray burst it open.

"Dad, could I borrow a dollar from you, an' you could take ten cents a week out of my allowance? It's awful important, it's a secret."

"What is it? Another gambling debt?"

Gray wriggled. "No, honest, I haven't shot any more craps, honest, Dad. This is—well, I just gotta have it."

"Why don't you ask your mother?"

"I can't." Gray sidled nearer, whispering. "That's part of the secret."

Hubert hesitated, and the boy squirmed ingratiatingly against his shoulder. Their money affairs were Lucinda's province, she was strict about their allowances. You must learn to manage on what you have, she told them. Gray's gambling episode was his big crime of the year to date. But deep in Hubert moved a desire to have a little approval from some member of his household, his hand reached into his pocket, came out with a worn billfold, and he gave Gray his dollar.

"Gee, Dad, that's swell!" Gray thumped his shoulder and was off, banging the doors shut.

Hubert finished his note, addressed and stamped the envelop, and hid it in a pocket of the brief case. Then he marched down the quiet hall—the boys had left for school, Lucinda's typing had stopped—put on his trench raincoat, his hat, and proceeded to the kitchen door.

"I'm off," he called. "I won't be in for lunch, there's a department meeting."

"Good-by," said Lucinda, curtly.

At the outer door he paused, he ought to have his dress suit sponged and pressed, could he just say, ordinarily, "Will you call the tailor, Lucy, and give him my tails?" That remembered stiff-kneed, wooden movement somehow deterred him, and he went back to the bedroom, pulled the suit from the hangers, draped it over one arm, and marched again to the outer door, hoping Lucinda would come into the kitchen and see what her mood drove him to do. But she did not appear.

Hubert, as the week advanced, was glad that Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday were his heavy days at college. He thought he might plan to use his office more, instead of working at home. Fewer interruptions. He was on the committee for Ph.D.'s, and had two long, statistical dissertations to read. He referred to them, but Lucinda did not offer to look them over, and he certainly wouldn't ask a favor of her. She was pleasant and impersonal, discussing Hitler and the Bund and Dorothy Thompson and the weather. Hubert thought the boys did not suspect any change. She was exactly like an iceberg, cold, transparent green ice, nine-tenths of herself submerged, held down under this chatty surface. Once the dinner party was over, he'd try to have a showdown, ask her if she thought she was reasonable, fair.

Her chilliness made him warm himself often with the prospect of that dinner, it became a shining, delightful occasion toward which his hours carried him, there would be other guests, of course, distinguished men and women, he would have a rare evening. He didn't exactly plan the speeches he would make, but he did stow away a few of Lucinda's phrases about current affairs. He could see himself bowing over Marie Estey's hand, entering her lovely drawing room—

Friday morning another orchid envelope lay on top of the letters and newspaper when he entered the kitchen. Lucinda had gone with the boys, she had stopped at the bathroom door to explain, some kind of parents' morning at school. What if Mrs. Estey had been taken ill and there was to be no dinner! Hubert tore the envelope open. A timetable, the train he was to take marked with purple ink. 6:29. He'd have to leave the house before six. He'd get home about five, to dress. Had the tailor sent back his suit? Lucinda hadn't said. Suppose— He rushed to the closet,

found it, creased and freshened, where she had hung it away.

When he came home, at 4:30, to make sure he had time enough, the apartment was empty. On the chest of drawers in the bedroom was a note from Lucinda, typed on a sheet of yellow paper.

The Camptons invited us for dinner, and we're all going to a hockey game this evening. I told them you had a previous engagement.

L.

Hm. Too bad it happened to be tonight. Campton was head of the department, the Camptons were really fond of Lucinda and the boys, they had no children of their own, but Hubert liked to be in on these informal evenings, he liked to please the Chief. Of course, it was a good thing something had turned up for Lucinda, she wouldn't be at home brooding over his absence. She hadn't, he noticed, laid out his clothes. Usually she had everything ready, silk socks, studs in his shirt, fresh tie. Good thing he'd allowed extra time.

He needed every second of it, before he finished dressing. A hole in one sock, the only pair of silk he had. He cut himself shaving, and couldn't find the styptic pencil. He ruined one tie. Altogether, by the time he had finished, he needed the glimpse of himself in the long mirror on the closet door to restore his temper. He was getting a trifle heavier, he ought to exercise more, but the black and white of evening apparel certainly did things for a man. It added to his height the inches he longed for. He wondered about his Phi Beta Kappa key, it looked a little out of place, but he left it there, at the edge of the vest pocket.

He reached the station forty minutes too early. He sat with an evening paper, feeling himself pleasantly con-

spicuous, white muffler open, one patent leather pump swinging; he watched the hand of the clock crawl toward 6:29. "For Time to shoot his barbed arrows at me," wonderful figure, he thought, the hands of a clock were like arrows. He stood at the gate reading the destinations of the train, you could make a line of poetry of them, Whitman did. And at last (at long last, he amended,) the conductor announced that the next stop was his. He thought the tired commuters eyed him enviously as he went along the aisle. He was a member of that other world, the world that dressed for dinner, that made of night hours something more than a period of recovery from toil, of dogged rest in order to work again tomorrow.

He had expected to find Andrews on the platform, but only the news-butcher was there, piling away his magazines, preparing to close his booth. Hubert went quickly around the station; this was Friday, wasn't it, he hadn't made a mistake in the night? A station wagon was parked in the driveway, Andrews lounged against a fender, smoking, talking with a fellow in uniform, the station master, perhaps; he stood up as Hubert rounded the corner, the station master laughed and strolled away.

"Good evening," said Hubert, in dignified inquiry.

Andrews opened the door for the driver's seat. "Warmer in front," he said, and Hubert climbed in. Andrews just missed him as he banged the door to, and walked through the headlights' glare to his side of the wagon. "Had the big car half washed," he said, as he whirled backwards, jerked into second gear, and made for the highway. "Didn't want to mess it up, road's sloppy." Take it and like it, was his overtone.

"Oh, I don't mind," Hubert shivered. The night air was cold, after the stuffy train, Andrews evidently hadn't wanted to bother with curtains. Mrs. Estey wouldn't have

allowed it, thought Hubert, if she'd known. Still, the station wagon met me at the train; that sounded like a line in a novel of smart country life. He hunched his shoulders, trying to squeeze the damp cold out of his body, and wondered whether he ought to attempt further talk with Andrews.

"Listen to that!" Andrews was leaning forward, chin on the wheel. "I gotta take that engine down next week, or else! Lis-sen to that!"

Hubert listened, and heard the swish of water cascading from the wheels.

"Every time the boss takes a trip in this wagon, he knocks the hell out of it. Hunting, fishing, he fills up the back with luggage and liquor, piles a couple of friends in, and off they go. I says to him, what do you do, knock over moose with the car? He don't care what he does."

"You mean Mr. Estey?" Hubert realized that Mr. Estey would be among those present tonight. He hadn't considered a Mr. Estey in his envisioning of the dinner, he had just vaguely thought of several men looking rather like the advertisements in *Esquire*.

"I mean him. The Boss." Andrews laid a finger on the horn button, the truck ahead yielded a piece of road, and he shot past, a shower of slush covering the windshield. He certainly hit a good clip, at night, on roads like this, thought Hubert. But he didn't hit anything else, and presently he swung into the private road which wound between elms up to the house. He drew up at the front door, where light fell warmly from iron carriage lamps on the delicate leaded panes. (They had brought the door from an old house in Charleston when they built, Mrs. Estey had told him.) Hubert waited while Andrews, much like a slow motion picture, dismounted and opened the door. Did

the fellow expect a tip, he wondered. "Thanks," he said, and he was thankful to escape from him.

The butler held the wide door open, and stood aside, deferentially. Hubert felt more at home with him than with Andrews, he looked less like a thug, there was perhaps something academic about his spare figure and his high, bald forehead. He folded Hubert's overcoat deftly, and placed it on the oak settle, beside a pile of mink, and other coats. Hubert smoothed his hair (thank God he wasn't going bald yet!) and squared his shoulders, listening through the laughter and talk from the living room for the high, light tone of Marie Estey's voice. "That okay?" he asked, chummily, and the butler said, "Very good, sir."

Marie Estey, in gray and lavender chiffon, moved out of the group at the fireplace end of the long room and floated toward him, one hand outstretched, the other touching lightly the curls bright as metal which topped her small head. "How wonderful of you to come all this way! You must have a cocktail at once, we're ahead of you. Dick, a cocktail for Professor Webster. My husband, Professor Webster." Mr. Estey shook hands with Hubert, inspecting him briefly, a flicker of curiosity in his aggressive, prominent eyes. He was a heavy man, taller than Hubert, he moved with assurance and superb co-ordination, his skin was tanned almost to the color of his crisp hair. "Glad to meet you," he said, as if he didn't care in the least. "I've heard Marie speak of you. I'll get you a drink."

"He never will mix enough," complained Marie. "You don't care if our guests die for lack of a drink, do you, darling, as long as you have your own way!"

"My God, how often do I have to explain a Martini's no

good unless it's fresh?" (Little interlude of marriage, thought Hubert, gazing anxiously toward the other guests. It was true, he was the only white tie there. But he didn't own a dinner coat, around the college affairs were one thing or the other, formal or tweeds.) "I guess Webster'll hang together till I mix a fresh batch, eh?" Mr. Estey strolled toward the table bar.

Mrs. Estey shrugged her thin shoulders, rolled her dark eyes at Hubert, said, "You must meet all these people," and led him down the room.

I'm going to wish I hadn't come, thought Hubert, feeling under his white shirt a dark nodule of misery forming. He said how do you do and how do you do, he couldn't remember the names, his face stiffened in a permanent smile, they were strangers, no, he was the stranger, they all knew each other, they were easy and gay, their chatter might almost have been in a language foreign to him for all he understood. He gulped the cocktail Mr. Estey handed him, it failed to dissolve the nodule. The butler seemed almost a friend, as he came with the tray of canapes, it was he who moved hastily to wipe up caviar from the soft white rug when the shell crumbled in Hubert's tense fingers. A young woman with dark hair in a cloud to her white shoulders, in a rustling dress striped like peppermint stick candy, lifted her curling lashes at Hubert. "Mrs. Estey says you say such marvelous things," she said, and waited.

"Here, let me fill her up." Mr. Estey threatened him again, the silver shaker poised. "He can't talk yet, Jacky, he's had just one."

"I don't believe—" started Hubert.

"Bosh!" Mr. Estey was filling the glass. "You don't have to lecture tonight, you know."

"Isn't he terrible!" screamed Jacky.

"Terrible when roused. Here, darling, have a sip." He strolled off, and Jacky darted after him, striped skirt bell-ing out. "Dicky, listen, my pet, you promised to ride with me tomorrow."

Hubert didn't hear the rest. He stood looking at the cocktail; here it was eight o'clock, hours past his dinner time, was he hollow with hunger or misery? He'd better find a place to deposit the cocktail not inside himself. He tried to pull his stiff face out of the frozen smile, to look nonchalant; he gazed about at the room, all white and silver, he had thought it marvelous the afternoon he had first seen it, when he and Mrs. Estey had sat on the divan there before the fire. Tonight, with the white brocade draperies drawn at the windows, with the diffused indirect light that seemed to spring from the corners, with the harsh black of the men, and the color in the women's dresses, in wasn't a house, it was a stage set, and he knew himself as an actor with no prompter, and not a line in his head. A hesitant step or two brought him before a painting which hung on the silver wall, a still life of purple and decaying fruit and a wine flagon, somewhat askew.

"Do you like it?" At last Mrs. Estey had separated herself from the man with black velvet hair and mustache who looked like an Italian count, she stood close to Hubert, her chiffons eddying, sending off ripples of the scent she always used. "I picked it up for a mere song, someday it will be priceless, one of his early things. He transcends form, you know, he uses color as if it were form. Isn't it marvelous? Dick thinks it's vile, but he's like most men." She sighed. "I wanted you to see it."

"I don't know much about modern painting," said Hubert. "It's—interesting." He felt impelled to glance about, to see whether Dick had an eye on him. Terrible when roused, a man who killed moose with a station wagon,

you couldn't blame his wife for reaching out— Sure enough, he was looming down on them, shaker in hand.

"Calling all thirsts, calling all— Good Lord, you haven't drunk that up yet?"

"Maybe he doesn't like your Martinis, darling. Wouldn't you prefer Scotch, Professor Webster?"

"Oh, no. No, indeed. They're perfect cocktails. I—I was just looking at the picture." Hubert pushed his hollow back against his spine, and looked at Mr. Estey. I won't drink it, he thought, I won't be bullied. Luckily, just then, the butler announced dinner.

Hubert never remembered much about that dinner. He sat halfway down the table, with the candy-striped girl (scarcely a stripe above the dark polished table!), on one side, and an older woman in black velvet, with a worn, bored face, caustic lines about her painted mouth, and the defensive prattle of the slightly deaf, on the other. Mrs. Estey had the Italian count on her right, and Hubert could hear her high, thin voice assuring him that he was *so* wonderful. Jacky kept leaning forward, presenting Hubert a view of the sharp wing of shoulder blade, the dead white of her skin over the small mounds of vertebrae, in order to shout down the table to Dick. The table reminded Hubert of a glassware display in Sloan's, crystal animals marching along the center, wine glasses flanking the purple glass service plates. Three wine glasses each. Now what? The first course was oysters, plump and malevolent. Hubert thought, I'll gag if I try one, the only way I can swallow one is to hold my nose, I can't put them in my pocket! He tried to be humorous about it to Jacky, "If you're raised in the Middle West, you never see an oyster out of a can, you have to get used to such things." She stared at him, oyster on a fork, and he almost choked as she swallowed it. Hubert managed one, and felt it join the nodule of

tight misery. He hid a second in the small dish of cocktail sauce, and nibbled a cracker. Lucinda said, not often, "You ought to try to acquire a taste for some things," and he always had replied, "Why should I, as long as you know what I like?"

The woman on his right turned toward him with an inquiry about which system he played. He didn't play bridge, he explained, he'd never cared to, such a protection in traveling if you said just no, you didn't play. She misunderstood him, and spent the next two courses and two rounds of wine persuading him to adopt Culbertson. Turtle soup. "Do they have turtles in the Middle West, Professor?" asked Jacky, bursting into bridge just for that inquiry, and turning again toward Dicky. Hubert ate it doggedly, he had to cover that oyster. We don't use them for soup, he could have said. At least the deaf companion needed no reply. The man across the table, a plump little fellow with gray hair and quick movements of face and hands, sipped his wine, and said, to Hubert, "Which year do you prefer in Burgundies?" Hubert sipped the wine, he looked as profound as possible, he had to say he really didn't know. But the main course was the worst. Squabs, stuffed with wild rice. He simply couldn't eat squab, when he saw them in a butcher's window he hurried past, seeing them instead walking delicately on their pink feet, curving their iridescent necks, talking, talking in low notes of love and life. The butler had entered with the wine basket, he uncorked the champagne with a deft flourish, when he reached Hubert's elbow, Hubert murmured no, thank you, but if the butler heard him, he didn't believe what he heard, and the wide goblet sparkled full. Hubert had drunk champagne just once before. He had bought a half bottle, in a moment of reckless abandon, and carried it home to Lucinda (he'd been afraid he might slip, he remembered, the streets were

icy) to celebrate her birthday, the year he received his appointment at college. He lifted his glass now, the tiny bubbles pricked his nose, and as he tasted it, he set it down so suddenly that it rocked over the brim of the goblet. Lucinda's birthday! Good God in Heaven, her birthday—was it today? "What's the date?" he said. Jacky was arguing about something—"I say he's lousy, definitely lousy, I don't care what the decision was!" He said it, more loudly, to the deaf woman. "What's the date? The *date*?"

"What day?"

" 's the tenth," said the man across the table. "Tent-tenth."

Hubert sucked in his cheeks, he felt the marrow in his bones harden with cold. The slender, delicate bones of squab all up and down the table were piteous, childish. He'd done it now. Friday, Lucinda had asked, this very Friday? Damn it, she might have told him, the boys might have told him, that was what Gray wanted his dollar for. He'd done it, and there was nothing now, nothing ever he could do about it. Once this endless dinner was over, he'd say he had to catch a train. Had to. He thought he'd drunk the champagne, but the glass was full. He needed something to dull this shock.

Then there was the moment when he thought the ordeal had ended. Chairs slid back on the deep piled rug, everyone stood, the butler opened the doors, one by one the women moved away, Jacky shouting back, "Let me stay and hear your stories! I hate it, you men having all the fun!" Hubert watched them in despair, until the butler closed the door upon their floating skirts, and the men sat again about the table. He was rigid with endurance, and his head felt curiously large above the eyes. Coffee helped. Brandy or port? Just coffee, he was firm about it, and no one urged him this time. The talk swung round and round

like the spirals of smoke from the cigars, hunting, a prize fight, a night club singer, something about hot stuff at the World's Fair. Engineering, road-building, bridge-building in Chile. The black-velvet-haired young man wasn't an Italian count, he was an American engineer, he glittered with the romance of distant countries from which he had only yesterday returned, Marco Polo himself, what had Hubert to offer against him? Estey's chest swelled, he cried out, "It's magnificent! Estey and Company, road-builders for the world!"

Hubert thought: I don't know the things they know, they don't know the things I know, but they aren't embarrassed, and I am. That's queer, I'll ask Lucinda—"What about it, Professor?" Richard Estey had his eyes, a trifle more prominent now, fixed on Hubert. "What do you think about allowing the Bund to meet in the Garden?" Hubert sat erect, he had ideas about freedom of speech, he started to explain, but Estey didn't wait, he thumped the table and the glasses danced. "I say to hell with free speech, we have a right to say what we'll stand for." Hubert thought: If I should get up and leave, they wouldn't notice. He measured the distance to the door, he could feel his leg muscles moving in a stealthy exit, he was practically invisible. But Estey rose first. "Shall we join the ladies? If we don't, Marie'll give me hell."

Fresh logs on the fire, fresh lipstick on the ladies, the butler opening a fresh magnum of champagne, or do you prefer Scotch, a moment while the women, seated together near the fireplace, pretended to ignore the entrance of the men, to cling to something feminine and secret, far more absorbing than this male interruption. Then the group unfolded, drifted apart, Jacky pounced at Richard Estey, the deafish woman attached herself to the plump gray gentleman, with a wifely concern about the quality of his amiable

confusion. Marie Estey moved languidly toward a white satin love seat in a corner, and the hand she lifted invited not Hubert, but the engineer from Chile, to her side.

"No, thank you," said Hubert, to champagne and to Scotch. "I've got to be going." He hadn't meant to speak so loud, everyone looked at him, even the deafish woman. "I have farther to go, I suppose there's a train."

"A train?" Jacky squealed. "Did you come on a train? How priceless!"

"A train, Jacky, you know, a thing people ride on." Estey brushed her aside. "Is there a train, Henry?"

The butler said yes, sir, in exactly twenty minutes.

"If you must go, Webster. The evening's young." Hubert nodded. "Marie!" Estey's word had warning in it. "Give Andrews a ring, Henry."

"I'll just call a taxi," said Hubert, desperately. Another trip with Andrews!

"Take too long to get one out here."

Marie Estey had risen, with a playful tap on the shoulder of the engineer. "Don't move! I must hear the rest, it's too marvelous!" She glanced at her husband, something petulant and mocking in the sweep of lashes, in the concave line from cheek-bone to chin. Then she smiled at Hubert, her hand in his was indifferent, meaningless, just thin flesh over bones. "Must you go? I'm so sorry. It was wonderful of you to come."

"Thank you," said Hubert, stiffly. "It's been"—go on, say it if you choke!—"a delightful evening." Should he shake hands with the guests, each in turn? He couldn't. "Good night, all," he said, and walked toward the distant hallway, step by step over the white rug, holding his breath to keep from bursting into a run.

"Andrews is coming right up." Henry held his overcoat, and as he turned to slide his arms into the sleeves, he found

Estey in the doorway, regarding him over the slowly wagging end of an unlighted cigar. Hubert tucked his muffler into place.

"Henry, get a cigar for Mr. Webster. Get a handful. They're special, you know, Ponson brought them in yesterday."

Hubert swallowed hard. "No, thanks. I—one's enough."

"You're too temperate, Webster." Estey's glance had mellowed, his eyes were still prominent, but they were suffused, they looked at Hubert with humorous reflectiveness, they were no longer arrogant. "Now me, I feel fine, easy, nothing worries me. You haven't had enough to be comfortable."

Comfortable, thought Hubert, comfortable! He dug a button through a buttonhole, he picked up his gray felt hat. "Good night, Mr. Estey."

Estey followed him to the outer door. "Is Andrews up yet?" The station wagon had just drawn up at the step. "What the devil you driving my car for?"

Andrews moved from the front seat with celerity, he touched his cap, the light showed his weathered face alert, respectful. "I just washed the big car, Mrs. Estey wants it first thing in the morning."

"Well, be damned careful how you handle that." Andrews nodded, and stood, hand on the door. "You know"—Estey laughed—"I feel about that bus almost the way I feel about a horse. More damned fun—" He shook Hubert's hand, and leaned his head close. "Say, Webster." Hubert looked at him, he had to look up a trifle, and suddenly squared his tired shoulders. Estey had a queer look, almost wry, he had dropped his aggressiveness, he was definitely kind, one man to another in the long war against women. He lifted one shoulder toward the living room. "That's her way. Ponson just got back. I brought him out

here yesterday, he's the white-headed boy today. See? Don't let it worry you. Well, glad I met you, we ought to get together, have a talk someday. 'Night."

Hubert stumbled on a step, Andrews took his arm officiously, under Estey's gaze, and helped him into the car. The night air was like water against Hubert's face, he leaned away from Andrew's shoulder, toward the dark cold air.

"Don't make a bit of difference what the Boss laps up, he's never high," said Andrews, presently.

Andrews thought he was drunk, did he? Hubert didn't care what Andrews thought. But when they reached the station, he unlatched the door and stepped out before Andrews could get around the car. He strode around the station without looking back, and after a moment heard Andrews drive off.

The train was empty and cold. Hubert settled his chin in his muffler, folded his arms tightly across the discomfort inside his ribs, and shut his eyes. He didn't think, he was at least alone, as long as the train went rocking through the night he didn't have to do a thing but suffer. White-headed boy. His eyelids burned, geometric patterns in black and white moved over his eyeballs.

He reached the entrance to the apartment house in this state of numbness, and there he stopped, looking up at the dark windows. He felt in the inner pocket of his overcoat, found the worn billfold, and fingered over the few bills. Then he walked back to Broadway. He walked a dozen blocks before he found what he sought, a florist's shop still open. The elderly florist, his eyes red-rimmed, peered suspiciously from the rear workroom. Hubert didn't look like a bandit. He came forward.

"I want some flowers, roses," said Hubert. "I thought I'd never find a shop that wasn't shut."

"I oughta be home hours ago," said the florist, "only I had this set-piece to do."

"Yes. Maybe that's what I need."

"You want something nice for a funeral, eh?"

"Just about." Hubert laughed. "Roses. Red ones."

The long box under his arm, he hurried back the blocks he had come. Four dollars, when there were things Lucinda needed . . . but he had to take them, he couldn't face her empty-handed.

The night elevator man slept with his head down on an arm on the switchboard desk. Yes, Mrs. Webster and the boys were home, hours ago. Hubert fitted the key in the lock, the box slid to the floor, the blood hammered at his temples as he bent for it, with one long breath he stepped into the apartment.

Not a sound. The night light burned in the hall. He hung away his coat and hat, and walked to the door of the bedroom. Still not a sound.

"Are you asleep?" he asked.

"No." Lucinda's voice was like a snowflake, a white feather, light and quiet and cold.

Hubert pulled the door shut, and felt his way around the foot of his bed, up the side to the small table that stood between the two beds. He found the chain and snapped on the light. Lucinda had her back toward him, the smooth, dark head did not move, the rounded cocoon of her body under the blankets was motionless. Hubert sat down on his bed, the box across his knees.

"Lucy," he said. "Lucy."

After a long moment, Lucinda rolled slowly over, lifting herself on an elbow, tossing the braided hair, with its little red ribbon, over her shoulder. She hadn't been asleep, she hadn't been crying, her eyes had again that bright, relentless, impersonal look of a bird.

"Well, did you have a fine time?" she asked.

"No."

She lifted one eyebrow. "Didn't you?" Her tone was indifferent.

"No."

"What a pity! When you'd looked forward to it so! Now, in our simple way, we had a very pleasant time." Her smile flashed a taunt.

"Lucy—" Hubert gulped. "I— Here!" He poked the box toward her, but she did not reach for it. "I brought you those," he said, humbly. Dear God, he thought, I've lost her, lost Lucy, she'll never forgive me, she was a stranger, remote, hostile, complete without him, she was the angel with the flaming sword barring him from what until this moment he had not known was his Eden, their life together.

"Did your Mrs. Estey send your wife some flowers?"

"No!" He shouted at her, desperately. "I bought them! For you."

"Why?"

He took the box back, yanked at the string, threw the cover aside, thrust the roses, crimson, fragrant, thorny, their dark leaves scattering drops of water, against her arm, under her stubborn chin.

Lucinda stared at him, and slowly her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them away, and more brimmed over the lids. Then she sat upright, the crinkled pink cotton night-dress slipping over her smooth shoulders.

"I don't expect you'll ever forgive me. It was pretty terrible. Your birthday, I mean. You—you know how bad I am, remembering, you might have told me! They had champagne, you know, we had it once." He was shameless, trying to move her that way, he couldn't stand it!

"I had a nice party," declared Lucinda. "The Camp-tons remembered. The Chief said he didn't think much of you—" She waited, and Hubert thought, That's just one more item, everything's gone. "I explained it was strictly professional. But it was just the last straw."

"I haven't forgotten anything else, have I?"

"Everything. For weeks and weeks."

Hubert looked at her, his hands crept along his thighs, down to his knees, and clung there, hard. "Lucy"—this was his offering, to her, his penance—"I had the most ghastly time. Everything was wrong, I didn't belong there, I suffered. Why, they didn't even have food I could eat!"

Lucinda stared, the color rising in her throat, in her face, and suddenly she was laughing, tears rolling down her crimson cheeks.

"Oh, Hubert, you're so funny! Food! Wasn't she nice to you?"

Hubert scrambled for a moment among his defenses, and then he slumped, hands trembling, palms upward. "Lucy, I was a total flop, an awkward frightened fool."


Lucinda made one quick movement, and was out of bed, on the side away from Hubert, picking up her green flannel bathrobe, tying the cord with a decided jerk.

"Where are you going?" The misery of the evening was a knife now, edged with fear.

"I'm going to get you a snack. You're starved." She came around the bed, her feet in lamb's wool slippers, and picked up the roses, one by one, laying them across her arm. Hubert did not dare to lift a hand to touch her, and she bent her head, sniffing the fragrance. "You look grand," she smiled, the hint of a dimple in her cheek, "but starved. Look, Hubert." With her free hand she seized his

ear. "They turned your head"—she tweaked his head away from her—"like that! And then"—she tweaked it back—"they turned it back! But you weren't a fool, I'm sure you weren't. Come on." She eluded his hands, and moved toward the door, a release in the quick grace of her walk.

SNOW IN SUMMER



Snow in Summer

*H*AZEL RAN down the stairs to the basement, caught her heel on a step, flung out her hand against the white-washed cement wall, and just didn't fall. She stared at her outstretched smarting hand, and shook it gingerly. Nothing sprained, thank Heaven! Her tongue lapped at the reddening scratches and she crossed more cautiously to snap off the racket of the washing machine. At the final subsiding rumble she gave a sigh of relief. There was always the chance that the whirling rhythm confined in that sleek, white-shining drum might someday get the better of her, explode, fill the whole basement with its froth and din. She wouldn't have told George about the animosity between her and that machine, but she knew that someday she would fail to make something fast, and it would electrocute her or drown her in suds, or flail her to bits. George had given it to her for a Christmas present, two years ago. She could see him now, explaining how it worked, a clear flush like a boy's standing out on his cheek-bones. She had demurred a little. Think how much it costs! Why, that would pay the laundry for weeks and weeks!

"But this will last for years, Hazel! Years! I can keep it in order. Don't you like it?"

He would have laughed at her if she had explained how it terrified her. She took a deep breath of the quiet in the basement, and watched the motes dance in the morning sun-shaft through the low window. Her tongue took a last

dart along her abraded palm, and she flexed her slim fingers. It would have been too awful if she had wrenched something! Her mind picked up the game with time it played so constantly these days. She'd be back in half an hour. Another hour to rinse and hang out the clothes, ten minutes to brush up the living room, she had the salad ready. Well, say ten o'clock. If no one telephoned, she might have two hours—but she must be careful. A kind of warning, the narrow escapes she'd been having. Just because she rushed so.

She held herself to a sedate pace up the stairs, a propitiatory offering to this household *poltergeist*. After eight, the Dutch clock over the yellow breakfast table said, and Lorna hadn't touched her breakfast. From the living room came voices, George's, exasperated, "But if you'd just watch, you'd see how I do it. See, this spring—" and John, "Gee, Dad, I'm late now. I tried to put that spring back. Where's Mother, anyway?"

Hazel was there instantly, her eyes round with dismay under the crisp fringe of lashes. Had John upset that typewriter again? George was hunched over the table, elbows, square shoulders absorbed, the tuneless hum with which he always worked (like a little dynamo, thought Hazel), breaking into a satisfied, "There it is. Now don't throw it on the floor if you can help it."

"I never did," said John. "Ole second-handed thing." He peered over his father's shoulder as George rattled the shift bar triumphantly.

"Will it run?" asked Hazel. "I warned you to be gentle with it!"

"Oh, sure." John croaked a little, being casual, and reached for his schoolbag. "It's time we got a move on."

George turned, brushing at the square tips of his fingers. "Lucky John spoke of it if you want to use it. Thought

you sent the bills all out." He came briskly across the room, a sturdy, compact figure, blond and well-scrubbed, his blue eyes alert and sanguine.

"Yes," said Hazel, vaguely, while she made automatic inspection of her son. He looked—well, grubby and stringy—beside his father. Growing so fast this last year or so. His face had a thin, surprised look. Hazel slid two fingers into a sagging pocket of his coat and drew out a limp, smudged rag which she dangled, her fine nose crinkling.

"Aw, gee, I thought I had a clean one." John squirmed past her and started up the stairs, three steps at a stride.

"Tell Lorna to come along this instant," Hazel called after him. "I'm getting the car now."

"I don't see what she does all this time." George opened the front door. "The postman's late, too, and this is the day my dental journal comes. He's not even in sight."

Hazel pulled a blue felt hat down over her soft hair, called, "Lorna! You must drink your milk!" and ran out to the dining room. The keys should be there on the buffet, in the silver cup, behind the candlesticks... in the corner of the top drawer. Where had she left them? Oh, not in the car again!

"Looking for something?"

(Oh, darn! Now he would know—) Her glance darted sidewise at him, caught the round bright expectancy in his eyes. "You've got them! Oh, you—" she thrust out her hand. "Please!"

"And where were they?" He spun the chain in a flash of metal on a taunting finger. "Lucky for you I happened—Ouch!" He jumped back, as Hazel, lunging for them, stubbed against his polished toe. "The time you'd save if you had a little system!"

"Meet you at the front door," called Hazel, hurrying out through the kitchen. Fall chrysanthemums and mari-

golds marched in rows of bright disks along the straight graveled drive to the small garage, and in the next yard, beyond the row of barberries, Polish Annie was hanging out sheets. Well, Mrs. Marks could afford a washer-woman; she had no children. Hazel swung back the doors, edged along the fender of the small sedan, and slid under the wheel, wriggling to free her knees from the pull of her blue piqué frock. She fitted in the key, made a few indeterminate movements of her hands, her face serious in concentration. Brake, gears, clutch. "It's valuable practice," George insisted. "I won't get the car out any more. You know how to drive, only you won't relax and let it be automatic." At least she hadn't driven into the back of the garage for days! Her toe pressed the starter button, and holding her breath she emerged in a bucking and erratic course which landed her, after a final parabola, in front of the house. George was probably right, but if only she could start off headfirst perhaps she wouldn't mind so much. Like that nightmare in which she went leaping backward through all the streets of the town, unable to stop because she'd forgotten the word. She laid a finger on the horn, but before she pressed it the front door opened and George stepped out on the tapestry bricks of the entrance. For a moment he stood there, hands lifted to fit on his new gray hat. For a moment Hazel looked at him, clear of the mists, the manifold subtleties of her intimacy with him, her emotion toward him. He might have been a stranger, seen for the first time in one of those intuitive flashes when she could see almost the stranger's image of himself, the way he hoped the world saw him. Confident, not exactly jaunty, but full of a kind of well-being which was a matter of equilibrium, inner and outer. He really likes his life, she thought. Teeth are terribly important, they're fascinating, a dentist is practically the mainstay of the world,

he likes the town, he likes this house, having a family. He's really as happy as anyone I ever saw. As he called into the house, "Come along, you two! Mother's waiting!" Hazel shivered, and her tight fingers swung the wheel a trifle. When he found out what she was doing, he would think it very funny. Now with driving, he enjoyed teaching her, he didn't really mind that she was stupid about learning. It would be dreadful if ever she did anything to shake this content of his. Not that he was smug; he worked too hard.

The three of them, George, John, and Lorna, were rushing at the car, and Hazel, tipping forward the seat beside hers, forgot the moment of strange inspection.

"Did you get any breakfast?" She saw, in the fresh curls at the back of Lorna's fair head, the cause for her delay. That rose sweater was growing too snug over small young breasts; Lorna liked the color and refused to wear anything else.

"She's banting, Mother." John plumped in beside his sister. "I hear her jiggling the bathroom scales every time I want to get in."

"If I was as skinny as you, I wouldn't say anything," began Lorna.

"All nonsense," said George, dropping the front seat and pulling shut the door with a sharp bang. "Eat what you want and work hard and you'll be the way you're meant to be."

"My goodness!" Lorna's voice came shrilly over the clash as Hazel, sliding forward, poked the gear level toward reverse. "Just because I don't enjoy guzzling!"

Hazel could feel the restrained patience with which George held himself until she fumbled into third gear and popped down the street. It would be almost better if he spoke out, except that when he just thought, she could pre-

tend she didn't know it. Now she was reasonably safe until she had to start up again after she dropped the children at school.

"Guzzle? Who guzzles? We, they, it est guzzledator."

Poor John and his Latin! Hazel laughed, partly a crumb of nervousness, partly amusement, and George, turning a moment from his alert vicarious driving, said, "You remember I like my girl as she is! None of your anemic slats for me!"

Of course Lorna did take after his people. Hazel drove along her thoughts drifting, melting one into the next, just at the edge of awareness, hazily beyond the focus of her attention on this hazardous business of driving. Lorna was a trifle on the solid side, but she had George's coloring, fair skin and hair. She wasn't exactly pretty, but later, when her character had firmed out— This corner was a bad one; Hazel peered left, right, and met George's blue glance as he peered first right then left. She pushed down her toe and leaped across the intersection. Just last summer, while she was in camp, Lorna had jumped out of childhood into—well, not maturity, but some of its superficial concerns. As if something had stepped too hard on the gas. Life ought to have a good driver, going along smoothly— She swerved, sucking in her breath, as a brown and woolly dog trotted across the road. George seized the wheel as she bumped over the curb, and swung the car back into the road. A long blue car rolled past, the chauffeur grinning. Mr. MacAndrews, on his way to the factory. Her knees had that untied feeling!

"You missed that one, Mother," said John. "Better luck next time!"

"It's those impulsive movements," said George, "that keep women from driving as well as men."

"Would you run down a dog?" cried Hazel.

"I never have. But if I had to choose between hitting one and wrecking the family—"

Hazel found herself biting hard on her upper lip. She pushed it out and ran the tip of her tongue over it. That was why she had that little fringe of chapped skin always after she had to drive. The shadows under the tall maples along the street were full of dogs! Why had she ever thought it would be nice to live out at the edge of town, in the new residence section? Three, two blocks more; she turned up a side street to avoid the few business blocks, and came through the small park to the high school, rocking the car as she pushed valiantly with both feet on clutch and brake. George got out, and the children clambered after him; John's books caught on the hinge of the seat, and as he stooped to free the strap he winked solemnly at Hazel. She watched a moment after George sat again beside her. Lorna had called out, a group of girls had turned, and she went toward them, her dark skirt tight with the quick movement of sturdy legs, the sunlight brilliant on her hair. John dawdled behind her, banging his strapped books against his thigh. Then Hazel peered sidewise under her lashes at her husband, and for a fleeting instant saw, in an unfamiliar contraction of muscles between his brows a kind of puzzled wonder. But all he said was, "John ought to try out for one of the teams. He's spindling. Needs filling out." Then the wonder disappeared, and he was comfortable again, knowing what to do. "Well, time to be off."

There was again a moment of suspended attention, of withheld comment while Hazel got under way, fairly smoothly this time. Then George said, in the uninflected, almost talking-to-himself tone of one who has no doubt of his listener's response, "I think I'm booked every hour today. That means night work again. Mrs. Wills's upper, and there'll be two sets of X-rays."

(Monday night. If I get the children off to their rooms early, I'll have sat two more hours.) Hastily, as George's silence nudged at her, "It seems forever since you've had a free evening."

"I really need a laboratory assistant, a mechanic." His hand darted toward the emergency brake. "Look out! That truck—"

With a squawk of the horn Hazel dodged around the red bulk as it swung out from the curb. "I saw it," she said. Well, she had, just as George spoke. "You'd never find one to suit you," she added, incautiously. These few blocks of morning business traffic took her mind off her words.

"I'm not unnecessarily particular," said George, calmly. "I didn't want another fender crumpled. And as for my work, it just has to be right. Take an inlay. It fits or it doesn't. And bridge-work—"

"I just meant—" Hazel was a trifle breathless, slowing behind the huge gray bus from the city, and then swinging past it as the one traffic light of the town, on the bank corner, showed green—"that you do everything so well yourself—" There, she drew up at the curb without grazing the tires. Sunlight glinted on the brass sign beside the entrance to offices above the bank. Dr. George Curtis. On the whole she'd done pretty well this morning. "You're a kind of genius, everything you touch, now aren't you, darling?"

"Well, I shouldn't go that far." George smiled. "Pulling my leg, eh? Just because I like things right. Anyway, I couldn't afford an assistant. Not till the X-ray machine is paid for, and the kids are educated, and the Building and Loan is settled. The more I make, the harder I work."

"But look at the reputation you're getting." Hazel was serious now, pride luminous in her eyes. "Even Doctor

Brown sending you cases, asking you to consult with him—You're really educating the town."

George nodded, his mouth firm at the corners. He didn't need her encouragement exactly; he had no doubts about himself. But he rather liked a salvo of trumpets before he rode away into his busy day. "Yes, I think all that new equipment is justifying itself. If only John wasn't so clumsy! Lots he could do to help me, a boy his age. I wouldn't dare trust him in the door. Take that typewriter this morning. Why, any boy could have fixed that. Sometimes I suspect he's putting it on, too lazy to try."

"Oh, no! I know just how he feels! Things like—like cars and typewriters are just malicious, the way they go wrong. John isn't lazy. He just knows you can fix it, whatever it is, just as I do."

"But John's a boy! He makes me uncomfortable he's so stupid."

"You don't really think he's stupid." Hazel laid her hand over George's, her finger-tips pressed, sensitive and light, against his knuckles. "He hasn't got your hands, but you wait!"

"You'd think I'd nothing to do but sit here and chin!" George gathered himself up alertly, brushed her cheek in a kiss which was less a caress than an absent-minded symbol of affection established past inquiry, and let himself briskly out of the car. "Blow twice when you come this noon, then I won't waste time waiting for you." He wheeled; his erect head and straight sturdy back vanished in the hallway.

At least he no longer waited to inspect her departure. Hazel smiled, remembering the day he had run after her for a block to tell her to release the brake. She could drive home now in her own way, and leave the car in front of the house, safe for her noon pilgrimage.

As she drove at a snail-easy pace out the wide street, she thought, it would be like a fairy tale, so much so that it can't happen. I'm just a silly fool, having a dream. That's why I don't dare speak of it. George would try not to laugh, but he'd get that rosy, amused look. Ten thousand dollars. Think what I could do! The mortgage, the X-ray machine, college.

It had all started with the typewriter. If George hadn't brought that home! She let herself into the quiet house, and stood at the door of the living room, looking at the thing, the round white disks of the keys dancing under her intent stare. He'd picked it up cheap, second hand, and set it in order. Better business to have his bills typed. Could she learn to run it? She had learned, after a fashion, holding herself to the attempt in spite of clatter and extraordinary results until she no longer wasted George's excellent stationery. If other people do it, then you can, she told herself. She had been telling herself that about a great many things, ever since her marriage. Such as keeping the house in order. She threw aside her hat, and moved quickly about the living room, gathering sheets of the Sunday paper, plumping cushions on the divan, brushing kernels of popped corn into the ash of the fireplace, straightening lamp shades, magazines. It was queer about marriage. You expected it to be—well, a prolongation of a state of feeling. There was that about it, of course. But what you didn't expect was that you had, suddenly, to become an expert at all sorts of things you'd never dreamed of doing.

Until she had married George, she had never done anything, in the sense of tackling the great variety of material items out of which life seemed to be composed. Her mother had spoiled her, of course, but like George her mother had been so competent that she forestalled activity from less skillful competitors. And they had been so proud

of her, her mother and father, for her graceful accomplishments in school. The darlings, she thought, as she hurried into the kitchen for a dust cloth. If they knew what I'm trying, they'd be sure— She felt that queer jerk deep in her consciousness, like the sensation of being dropped too quickly in a swift elevator, with which she came upon the fact of their being dead. It had happened so suddenly, and had interrupted the pattern of her life with George so little that for long busy stretches she almost forgot.

If her father had not gone to that training camp on the Lakes the dreadful winter of the flu epidemic, he would still be alive. And she might never have known George. There had been too few doctors, and her father had worked night and day trying to save the boys. When, finally, he had almost died himself with pneumonia, Hazel and her mother had gone to Chicago, had waited until they could bring him home. Hazel, seventeen, had met George, had thought him an archangel, Michael himself, his bright hair and fair skin brilliant in his uniform of petty officer making him a thing of life in a scene of appalling death. Her father had said, "We need a good modern dentist in Lounsberry. If you ever get out of this, and want to locate, think us over."

Her father had come home with a heart never the same, and so, in a way which faced life and not death, had Hazel. When, a year later, her father said that a fellow named Curtis had turned up, sort of prospecting for a dentist's office, Hazel knew she had just been waiting. And later— she could see her father's face now, as he had talked with her, waxy, wrinkles down the long cheeks, around the deep eyes like a bit of used paraffin paper—"But, good Lord, Hazel! I thought you'd want someone different—someone you'd meet at college—" she had said, "He is different. I don't want to go to college."

"And I'm responsible for getting him here!"

"You've always got me what I wanted!"

"I'd like to, as long as I can." Something had happened to his face, like a hand giving the paraffin paper another crumple.

He had died before Lorna was born, and her mother, rather like a clock there is no one to wind, had quietly run down a few years later.

Then for years Hazel had gone about her new business of housewife and mother, thinking, when she at rare intervals looked at herself, that the slim, dreaming girl who had written poetry, who had delivered the class valedictory, who—but what did it matter? She was gone, perhaps her bones were still the same, but her very flesh was different.

An hour later the clothes-horse in the backyard oscillated gently with its burden, the planes of linen and garments making in the sunlight a design of labor done. Hazel came into the living room with two square black hatboxes which she set one on each side of the straight chair. She seated herself between them, and for a moment relaxed, spine soft, suds-crinkled finger-tips pressed against cheek-bones. But she couldn't be tired, not until this job was done. A month ago she had dropped into a bog of consternation: she had been mad to start such a thing, she was too ignorant, too ill-equipped, she had better throw hatboxes and all into the fire. That had been just after the children had returned from their summer at camp, and George had come back from his fishing trip. Perhaps she had worked too many hours while she was alone. At any rate, after a few days she had swung herself into the double rhythm of taking care of the family and stealing time for herself, a half hour, an hour, whenever she was alone. Second wind, her father would have called it. "People don't begin to use themselves, there's an inner reservoir they don't tap. I

see it often enough in a crisis. I tell you, Hazel, some of the old boys that did so much, generals, geniuses, what-not, they'd learn how to dip in, how to work up second wind."

Hazel wasn't sure just what her father had meant, but she knew she had to finish this task if she wanted to be at ease with her self-esteem, and the very compulsion seemed to produce the necessary energy. She pushed back her shoulders, and her face lost its soft, relaxed aimlessness. The upper lip looking long and Irish under the fine nose, pulled down, its curve straightening, and the eyebrows, even, fine accents of the structure of wide brow and eye sockets, drew together. She whisked off the lids of the two hatboxes, picked out of that on the left an exercise book with a mottled cover, and from that on the right, sheets of white paper. She propped the copybook open against a pile of George's *National Geographics*, and slid the paper under the roller of the machine.

It had really started with the typewriter, she thought, again. Until George had brought it home, she had just scribbled in her copybooks; she would buy them for a nickel at the drugstore which kept school supplies, and no one ever wondered what she did with them. She couldn't remember just when she had started that. After the children were both old enough to go to school, and she was efficient enough so that she no longer lost the frantic race between the length of a day and the tasks she must finish—or was it when George began to go back to his office after dinner? At first he had had time during the day, poor boy, because not many people noticed his shiny new sign. She could remember well enough the first day he had been busy every hour. "Wasn't I right, Hazel? Even if I offended Mrs. Betts, insisting that she had to pay when she forgot her appointment, you see it made them think I was busy and couldn't be fooled with. Now you see!" What

she saw, among other things, was that now she had long evening hours on her hands. She couldn't leave the children, and there wasn't much to do if she had left them, as she didn't care for bridge, and the moving picture theater was open only on Saturday. George said, "We can get a maid pretty soon, if you want one, although with all this modern equipment—" Then, before they reached even the point of discussing a maid, along came the depression, so that people couldn't pay their bills, even when they could no longer put off a visit to George, and George worked harder than ever.

She had tried reading. But she knew most of the books in the small library, and she found nerves twitching so that her feet jumped, as they had when, a little girl, she had sat beside her mother through a long sermon. Reading for hours and hours would be all right when she was an old woman, but now it was too like watching someone else run and dance and live when inside her something turned and twisted and pressed to break into its own movement.

When the children were little she had told them stories, about her own childhood, about her father, about his people. Lorna never listened long, but John loved them, and gradually Hazel had woven a long serial which went on night after night, held rigorously by the boy to fidelity in every statement. "No, Mother! You said he had his possessions tied in a handkerchief on a stick, not in a bag at all!"

She had always liked her father's yarns about his people. Restless footed, he had called them, coming from Ireland and southern England to this country, settling in the east, and then the restless footed moving on, west again. Perhaps, after all, it had all started with the unused copy-book she had found the first summer the children were in camp, and the sharpened pencil. Put the two together, and

there was Hazel, starting to set down the story she had spun so many nights for her son. When she had filled one book, a nickel bought another. Her hand-writing was amusingly uncertain, a product of the period when the public schools swung from Spencerian script to round and horizontal letters; Hazel had made a queer combination of the two. But at the end of an evening with the copybook, slipped into a table drawer as she heard George at the door, she had a half-guilty, warm-cheeked contentment.

When she had started the first copybook she had no clear notion of what she meant to do, and telling George seemed too like confessing a private vice, trotting out a fragment of day-dream. When she had filled two books she hid them in a hatbox on her closet shelf, under a winter hat. She was finding writing like wine, and tipping on words she set down many things she had never known she felt. It was unlikely that George would have curiosity enough to read all the scribbled pages, but she ran no risk. And she didn't want him to point out with patient good humor that she was wasting hours of time. Then last spring, at the final meeting of the Ladies' Literary Society, a lecturer from the University had given her the final push into what seemed at moments a life of crime. Certainly it took as much scheming and equivocation as a clandestine love affair. She typed CHAPTER SIXTEEN at the top of the sheet, and, a little ridge of concentration between her brows, began vigorously to peck. "The country is looking for new voices," the lecturer had said. "The Middle West must grow more articulate. There may be someone among you ready with the next great novel." Then as proof of the country's eagerness he had cited awards, fellowships, prize contests. "Here's a new publishing house, just being launched. Does it look for established authors already with

repute? No. It offers ten thousand dollars for the best first novel from a writer who has never published a thing."

A good many of the club ladies had gathered around the lecturer to ask questions. After all, they had paid him twenty-five dollars just to come over from Ann Arbor, and he had talked only an hour. "But don't you think, Professor Elson, when so many things in the world are unpleasant, that our writers should give us what is pure and sweet?" Hazel, being part of the refreshment committee, was passing cakes. If she could get him alone for one second, could ask him one question! No hope. Miss Emma, one of the two Buckley girls, who wrote poems for the *Lounsberry Weekly Record*, was holding her cup of tea dangerously near his crisply buttoned coat and bubbling at him through her very new teeth. Hazel offered cakes to them, with a protective glance at Miss Emma. (George had been funny, about the way her transformation had slipped while she was biting on plaster for the upper plate.) But the young lecturer wasn't laughing at her; he was concerned with escape, he had an engagement, he had appreciated the audience very much indeed, very receptive, and he had edged past the barrier of silk bosoms and tea-cups, disappearing just as the ladies' quartette started the Spring Song.

She couldn't have asked him without someone overhearing, anyway. But after two days in which she dodged and twisted only to find the same idea in the middle of her thoughts every time she opened her mind's eye, she wrote to Professor Elson. A friend of hers was writing a book, would he please send her the name of the new publishers he'd spoken about. When he didn't answer, she wrote a second time. She was sorry to trouble him, but would he please? Then she watched for the postman, and luckily reached the door first the day the envelope addressed in

her own hand came back to her, with a printed announcement, and an apology scrawled in the margin: sorry, my secretary overlooked your request.

October first. Ten more days. She tapped more briskly, and the paper slid crooked as she reached the bottom of the page. She managed to finish the line, if slightly on the bias, and pulled out the sheet. Page 292. She wasn't sure how many pages a book should have. Some of Dickens seemed very long, and she'd looked at *Anthony Adverse* with dismay. Well, a man might find time to write as many pages as that; she couldn't. *Pere Goriot* was much shorter, and her father had liked that. She was a little troubled because the typewriter lacked quotation marks and authors seemed to use them. On one page she tried inserting them by hand, but the pen marks looked unprofessional. Lucky for her the machine had capital letters and periods. She adjusted the next sheet. Yes, the typewriter really was responsible. She had been struggling with the exercises George had brought home, until she was sick of the sly gray fox and the aid of the party, and she had suddenly thought it would be more fun to copy a piece out of one of her copybooks. That had done it. Almost like seeing one's self in print to have the transformation from intimate careless scribbling into the uniform impersonality of printed letters in straight rows. (Or almost straight; a few hops and glides of letters.) For the first time she had thought of her own words as standing out apart from her, making a shape for someone else to see. The idea that she might make a book had started right then, although she had waited for the circular from Professor Elson before she admitted it.

John alone had suspected anything. "What on earth do you pound that ole typewriter so much for?" he asked. "I woke up last night and you were just a-going at it!"

"Just practicing." Hazel thought: I can't tell John, because I'd be so mortified then if I didn't get the prize. I should have taken up painting. That doesn't make a noise.

She had time for another page before starting luncheon. Only part of this last copybook left. Do not insert name of author on script. Script was this thickening pile of sheets. Write title of book and name and address on separate sheet, and enclose in sealed envelope. She had already done that. *Your Hand Upon the Gate*, by Hazel Browning Curtis. She had thought of naming the book *Restless Feet*, but decided it sounded too much like horses. Her concentrated haste had brushed color over the narrow bridge of her nose and under her eyes when at quarter before twelve she tied the covers on the two hatboxes and carried them upstairs to the closet shelf.

Five minutes behind schedule, having turned the gas low under her lunch dishes, and set the table, she ran out to the car. She could drive fairly fast with no passengers aboard. High school was already dismissed; she kept a quick eye out for her two, among the drifting groups, girls with sunlight on their curled heads—(I'm positively the only girl in my class who hasn't had a permanent, Mother!)—boys dawdling behind the girls in noisy pairs or trios... scuffling, shrieking out jokes which the girls pretended not to hear. They act just as we used to, thought Hazel, in spite of all the talk. Playing up to each other before they know why— There's John! Straddling a hydrant at the corner. He propelled himself with a minimum of effort into the car. "Here we are again," he said.

"Have you seen Lorna?"

"She went on over town."

"I'm not very late, am I?" Hazel let the clutch pedal jump up, the car bucked gaily down the street.

"I haven't waited more'n an hour or two." John had a solemn drawl.

"Yes, you!" Hazel laughed. "Have a good morning?"

"Lousy."

"John!"

"Pardon muh. Stinko, then. Honest, I bet I'll flunk that Latin. No sense to it."

"Nonsense. You never flunked anything yet. Don't say that to your father!"

"He'll know soon enough. Then I'll be more popular than I am now."

Hazel stared straight ahead, her mouth firm. She'd have to talk to George; he had been riding John too much about—oh, springs out of typewriters and such! "If you were more popular," she said, lightly, "you'd—" She jammed down the brake as the traffic light jumped red at her, and a car following cracked against the bumper. She peered guiltily over her shoulder, but the grimy face of the truck driver behind seemed unperturbed. Too much to handle car and domestic nuances together! As she drove across the street she saw Lorna, standing in the triangular recessed entrance of the drugstore, her face lifted in gay absorption to that of a strange young man whose red head bent toward her, shooting up from broad shoulders on which stretched a grayish sweat shirt with extraordinary inked designs. Hazel poked the nose of the car toward the curb, and peered at John. Something startling about the pose of the two figures, obliviousness, challenge. John was staring gloomily at his father's sign, as if he hadn't seen Lorna. "Who's the boy?" asked Hazel. It couldn't offend John's code to tell her that.

"What boy?" John overdid his inspection of the neighborhood. "Oh, him! He's new this year. Daniels his name is. He plays football."

Lorna had given a little start, spying the car, and after a moment of concentrated animation, quick words too low to reach Hazel, strolled out to the curb, her creamy blandness implying that she had been waiting tedious hours. So this is the next one, thought Hazel. Just a day or so ago she'd asked Lorna where Tommy Burke kept himself, and Lorna had said, "That dope! My goodness, how should I know?" This boy looked—well, older. John got out, muttering he'd like a back door to the car so he wouldn't have to move around all the time, and Hazel punched the horn button twice. Unnecessarily, because as she blew George appeared at the doorway, hat under his elbow, and beside him a young woman. Hazel was thinking: Lorna's only sixteen, but she looks older. Something about that red-head I don't like. Just the way Lorna looked at him. Lorna tossed her head as she climbed into the car, and her smile at Hazel was bright with defiance. Don't worry, darling, I won't say a word; I know better than that! Why didn't George come along, and who was the woman, anyway? Hazel leaned forward; the edge of the door cut her view. "You'll have to wait," drawled John, "till Dad finishes his lecture." A hint of laughter crinkled at the corners of Hazel's eyes, but she kept her mouth sober. It was true, George did have his serious, now-I-will-tell-you-all manner, one forefinger beating against the palm of an outstretched hand. His hat slid down as his finger grew emphatic, and he stooped for it, brushed it off without losing a word. The woman was very smart, like a red-winged blackbird in tailored suit and scarlet purse to match the long quill on her small hat. Even her hair lay in a black and shining swirl, like feathers, and she had certainly repainted her mouth if she'd been having anything done to the teeth that gleamed as she laughed. "I'll think it over." She waved her purse, and strolled away, her dark, indif-

ferent eyes not even grazing the car or Hazel's half-curious face. It is time for fall clothes, thought Hazel. But George hadn't sent a glance after that smart figure. A suit does things for you, her thoughts jumped along. But she must have at least a dead tooth! She wondered if George's habit of monologue had grown a little, perhaps because his listener so often had a mouth too full of cotton and rubber dams to answer back! But John mustn't laugh at his father. Just because George was so much in earnest—

He sat beside her, the clean whiff of antiseptic soap filling the car as he banged shut the door. "I'm glad to sit down," he said.

Hazel backed gingerly out from the curb and drove down the block of stores. At the corner where the large sign LOUNSBERRY HOUSE announced progress in neon letters, she turned, just as the woman in the black suit started across the street. The woman moved ahead with an arrogant indifference to small town traffic, and Hazel stalled the engine. "I wish people would look where they're going!" she said, as she trod on the starter.

"It is a good idea," said George.

(Only he means me, thought Hazel.)

"I wonder if she's staying at the hotel." George craned his neck.

Hazel couldn't say "Who is she"; suddenly she felt too cross to say anything. But Lorna asked. "Is she a new patient, Father?"

(Even her voice sounds excited, thought Hazel. She's trying to start something else, so I won't ask about her new boy friend.)

"She may be," George was saying. "She's making a canvass for a dental supply company, she's a representa-

tive of the concern, but we got to talking about her own teeth. She's practically agreed to come back for some X-rays. She's a very intelligent woman."

"Be kinda hard on her," said John, reflectively, "if she had to have a tooth pulled every time she got an order."

"She said," continued George, "that she seldom saw an office, except in the largest cities, so well equipped as mine."

"My goodness," said Lorna, "I shouldn't think she'd like to go all around like that!"

"I don't know." George stopped eyeing the street ahead for a moment to turn his head toward his daughter. "Not that I'd like you to go on the road. But she has her own car, and she seems to like it."

She does, does she, thought Hazel, with unexpected wryness. Well, I hope she doesn't sell George something terribly expensive. Like that new washbasin with foot-pedals, so he didn't have to touch the faucets after he'd washed his hands. Oh, *dear!* I mustn't be so edgy. Nothing's happened. Lorna's had beaux before, and George—as she rounded a corner into their own street she let her elbow rest against his arm, and her tension relaxed. She even smiled a little, remembering George, years ago. "A dentist is about as safe as a man can be. Any woman knows she hasn't got a throb of sex appeal left when she gets her mouth wide open and a drill going in it." Even a swanky saleswoman was a dead tooth to George. Typing always made her nervous, this double life was getting her down. If she weren't so near the end— When she brought the car successfully to a stop in front of the white house, she had pushed herself into her usual busy and quiet acceptance of the three of them as her family home for lunch, all separate undercurrents submerged.

On Friday afternoon, the last day of September, Hazel was hunting for a piece of paper large enough to fold around a box. It would be a joke, she thought, if after all these months of work she couldn't send off her book because she couldn't wrap it properly! She rummaged through the pile on top of the broom closet, and off it slid, grazing her nose. Odds and ends; the only thing in the pile large enough was a brown paper bag from the grocer's, rumpled but intact. Hazel smoothed it out on the table. Something fatally appropriate, a tag of domesticity. She might better save the money the postage would cost. Her fingers were listless with dejection as she lifted the tattered lid of the box (the paper on which she had copied the book had come in the box, and she might have been more careful of it if she had known she would use it as casket). Yes, casket. That was just the way she felt about it! She'd expected elation and triumph; if she didn't hurry she wouldn't have the courage to send the thing away! There lay the sealed envelope, her name inside, *Your Hand Upon the Gate* somewhat aslant on the outside. She tied a piece of twine about the box, and slid it into the paper bag. With a little folding over along the sides, at the end, she could make it serve. Ship by express or first class mail, said the directions.

She stared at the window, where fall drizzle and fog pressed flat and gray, seeming in its monotone to be without depth, drabness painted on the glass. If she went to the Lounsberry post office, Mrs. Pickett or Sam would come to the window. "What's in it, Hazel?" The Pickett back yard had touched the back yard of the Browning place when Hazel was a girl. People had complained that Mrs. Pickett was worse than a daily gossip column, but after Sam came back from the war his amputated foot carried him right through civil service and change in admin-

istration. Hazel couldn't hand under the lifted grill such a parcel as this, with the inscription: Prize Novel Contest, Horn and Westerby, Publishers. She could hear Mrs. Pickett. Like the time she had told George about the money order for the new office chair for Christmas! That would be a way for George to hear what his wife had been doing! "I'm not a bit surprised," Mrs. Pickett would say. "Hazel always had her nose in a book when she was a little girl." Brr! Her very skin felt too tight, chill-shrunken, at the inevitable calamity.

If she had time to go into the city— But she had to send the thing today or never at all, and even if she had time—already the clock pointed to half-past three—she couldn't conceal a trip to town. "But whatever did you go in for? You didn't say you were going!" Hazel decided that a life of crime presented unique difficulties. She might drive to the next village. The postmaster there didn't know her, and if she took a back road out of Lounsberry—"You have to be careful," George had said that noon. "These damp leaves falling are almost the worst hazard." She saw herself in a ditch, she heard George or Lorna or John explaining, in somber, tragic tones, "We don't understand what she was doing, she never went to Roseville," and hastily, before her imagination could bog her into immobility, she buttoned on a raincoat and pulled a hat well down on her troubled head.

She reached Roseville without a skid, parked the car in front of a chain grocery, the one note of color in the drenched, deserted street, and, the box bulging under the raincoat, to keep it dry, she darted from the car into the one-story building, the sign almost lost in the dinginess of the window. The postmistress was fat and suspicious. "What's in it?" she said, as Hazel had feared. "Typewriting," said Hazel. "I—I'd like to register it." The post-

mistress turned it round and round. Did she smell a bomb, or hear it ticking? "You oughta seal it, then."

After a despairing ten minutes Hazel had found glue at the shoe-repair and fruit shop on the corner, had stuck down the ends of the grocery bag, and, talking too much, she couldn't seem to stop, about weather, roads, the automobile plant between Roseville and Lounsberry, at last had the stamps affixed, and the thin strip with the registry number in her fingers. "The mail goes out today, of course," she said, finally.

"Gone," said the postmistress.

"Oh!" Hazel crumpled the receipt in her palm. "But this has to go today!"

"Postmarked the thirtieth," said the postmistress. She reached for the surrendered box, as if to sniff out the reason for such urgency, and Hazel, backing toward the door, murmured something.

As she drove toward Lounsberry, the windshield wiper keeping a rhythmic half circle of clearness, she tried to remember what she *had* said. She thought: of course Roseville people know George. Lots of them come over. Maybe the postmistress herself— Then she remembered the woman's mouth, with the white china display, and drove more swiftly along the rain-dark road. That postmistress didn't know George. But what did people do when they had something like—well, like a murder, say, to hide?

She came in to Lounsberry by the upper road, past the schoolhouse, down into the business block. Too late to pick up the children, too early for George. She'd stop for oranges, and if anyone asked her, that was where she had been. As she passed the bank corner she glanced up toward the windows of George's office. The neatly shirred pongee curtains she had made caught streaks of red from the traffic light, bars against the amber glow behind them. Well, she

thought, I've wasted a dollar and sixty-seven cents. And how many hours! And now it's all over, but anyhow, George needn't know.

The judges appointed by Horn and Westerby, Publishers, were having their committee meeting. As the date for release of the prize announcement was January fifteenth, and this was January thirteenth, they knew severally, and in various irking ways, that they must, today, commit themselves. They met in Mr. Horn's new office, thirty-two stories above Fifth Avenue, and Mr. Horn himself had dropped in for a few minutes. "I don't intend to offer suggestions," he said. "I just want to repeat that this isn't a Nobel Prize you're awarding. We want a book to sell. We've got the organization, we've got a staggering sales campaign—did I tell you we're planning to ship by motor truck and trailer, with loud speakers?—all we need is a book." He was a dapper little man, with an exaggeration of grimace and gesture which kept his hair rumpled and cut premature wrinkles in his thin face. He whirled now and darted from the room as if the loud speaker had summoned him.

The members of the committee looked at each other. "Nice little pep talk," murmured Carlton, a plumpish, bald book-columnist on a daily paper. He was irritated at his presence at the committee meeting anyway. He had no recollection of making Horn any promise to serve as judge, but Horn had cited place and date, a cocktail party a year ago, when the staidest firm in town showed what they could do for a novelist. Either the Scotch had made him incautious, or he hadn't believed Horn would find anyone with funds to back him. He'd told Horn he never read novels any more. Too ephemeral. He didn't tell Horn he found it easier to establish himself by expressing violent opinions on books

no one else was likely to read. But Horn had promised real publicity for the judges. He was a good salesman; that was why he'd hooked Westerby as partner. "The advertising agent turned into the custodian of our literature," Carlton added.

Letitia Thomaston blinked her myopic and large brown eyes in Carlton's direction, and the lavender orchid which she had bought for herself that noon trembled on her silver fox scarf. Carlton had never spoken of *one* of her books, although for several days after each of her latest serials appeared in covers she looked at his column. She didn't read it, she just glanced at the title he had so captiously selected. When Alf Horn had spoken to her about being a judge, he had said, "Carlton's one of them. You might get chummy with him. He could do a lot for you." Not that she needed much done, but what she always said was, when thousands of people just run to get the next issue of my serial, it seems strange that no reviewer can understand my message. Carlton's face, well outside her radius of clear vision, was an amber egg. He looks just like a changeling, she said to herself; a disagreeable baby. "I need you on that committee, Letty," Horn had urged her, "to balance Carlton. You know what the public likes. He's too—" Now had Alf called him erotic or exotic? Not that there was much difference. And as Alf had promised, there weren't many manuscripts left to read by the time the office had combed out the hopeless.

"It is a great rethponthibility," said Letitia Thomaston. "Bestowing such a large thum on an unknown writer when we don't know who it is and our own names are attached to the award!" She spoke in accelerated tempo and the listener was not sure whether she really lisped or just slid over some of the consonants. "Personally I think it was a mith-take to limit the prize to new writers. Everybody who can

write is in print already, and a great many of them ought not to be."

"I know what the mistake was," said Carlton, gloomily. "I should have written a novel instead of being a judge. I could use the ten grand."

"I always meant to write one," said Mrs. Rudolph Arner, the third judge. "But I never have had time."

For an instant Letitia and Carlton stared at her, united fleetingly by hostility toward an amateur. Mrs. Arner, sleek, plump, well clothed in a dark frock so simple and extreme that Letitia had felt a doubt of her own velvet, had a way of appearing on committees, a pleasant little moon illumined by her husband's reputation as essayist and editorial writer. She entertained frequently and well, and she seldom interfered much with committee decisions. She was a little troubled at present, because her second cousin's daughter had submitted a manuscript for this contest, and Mrs. Arner thought in glancing at papers, she had recognized it. She had said, firmly, "You must not give me an inkling, otherwise I can not be on the committee." Her second cousin Minna had cried. "You know what it would mean to us!" Mrs. Arner did know, among other things, that such an award would mean Rudolph could stop sending a monthly check to Minna. But she knew, too, the untemporizing scorn Rudolph would feel for any shade of nepotism, and that knowledge of Rudolph buttressed a certain crack of practicality in her own honor. The trouble right now was that she thought she knew, without intending to know, without pre-knowledge, which manuscript had come from Minna's girl. Should she lean backwards in an attempt to escape suspicion from Rudolph, and vote it down? Especially when she wasn't sure?

"But then, if we had all written books, we couldn't give each other the money, now could we?" Her secret dilemma

heightened the slight accent of her husky, rich speech.

"We might as well get down to business." Carlton's implication was that the women had been talking for hours. "Shall we vote at once, or do you (grudgingly) prefer discussion?"

"What's the use of being a committee if you can't talk?" Mrs. Arner jumped her chair forward until she could reach the pile of manuscripts on the glass-topped table. "I can't remember them by name, anyway. Names seem to have nothing to do with what's in a book nowadays." If she got them to talking she could see whether that one had a chance. She couldn't help it if they chose it; even Rudolph couldn't blame her for that. Only five had survived the earlier meetings.

Carlton twirled his wrist until he could see the face of his watch. "I've got to get out of here before night," he said. "Let's vote."

"Before we vote"—Miss Thomaston's orchid was choreatic—"I must go on record. There is one book there I think we should discard. If by any chance it has two votes I should be compelled to resign from the committee. I could not allow my name to be associated with such—such —" She had wound herself into such tight sibilance she had to stop.

"You mean my choice, I suppose," Carlton's face had no expression, except for a widening of nostrils. "*Alley Cat*. The only book in the lot with any guts."

"That's just it! That's all it's got! No, Mr. Carlton, your jaded palate may relish that rank taste, but my finger has rested for years on the pulse of the reading public. I know how their heart beats!"

"Oh God!" Carlton's lips made the words without a sound, and Mrs. Arner wriggled on her chair. Something stimulating about real argument, especially when she could

see each side so clearly! Carlton said, aloud, "Since you have been so frank, may I explain that your choice offends me even more? Obsolete and immoral saccharinity. Resigning wouldn't be enough! I'd have to commit suicide!"

"Then those two cancel each other," said Mrs. Arner. "I don't believe either would fit a loud speaker."

They voted on the three remaining, three times, and each time each book had one vote. Mrs. Arner did not vote for the book she thought Minna's daughter had submitted, and she couldn't decide from the printing on the slips which of the other two had chosen it. Carlton looked as if at any moment his boredom would become complete paralysis, and Letitia Thomaston wore a glaze of indignity.

"I'm tired of this," said Carlton. "Let's draw lots. They're all tepid. Horn will blow hard and get his money back. What difference does it make?"

"It makes a difference to me. I am not part of a lottery, I am a judge. My first choice is thtill *Ordeal By Love*." (And mine is *Alley Cat*, muttered Carlton.) "But since I have no co-operation, and since it is almost five o'clock—" she blinked hostile eyelids toward Carlton, and then turned toward Mrs. Arner bending forward to pull some focus around the woman's face. "I should think *we* might agree—"

"I'm not a bit dogmatic," said Mrs. Arner, hopefully. "I don't really know which to pick, and so I voted for *Aspic and Honey*."

"At least it begins with an A," said Carlton. Mrs. Arner smiled at him. He didn't bother her at all; Rudolph could be much more sarcastic.

"But I'm willing to change." Mrs. Arner took a long breath. Not even Rudolph could impute partiality to her now. She didn't really know it was Ethel May's book; she only knew that Ethel May had a modern way of writing,

without ordinary aids to the reader such as punctuation and capitals, and the pages of this book had the same queer nakedness. "I'll vote for the one about the hand on the gate, if you will."

"And this," said Carlton, as he agreed, "is the way democracy works." When he opened the door, Horn leaped up from a chair, with the capped and spurred air of one whose horse paws and prances to be off. "Yes," said Carlton, "it is the unanimous decision of the committee. And if you ever catch me again!"

"Oh goodness, don't tell me it's meat pie night again!" Lorna gave a wriggle intended for a shudder as Hazel slid the casserole onto the mat in front of George.

"We have to finish the roast." Hazel spoke indistinctly, nibbling at the tip of a finger she had just burned.

"What's wrong with meat pie?" asked George, bisecting the brown crust neatly. "Especially your mother's."

"They're so—so common." Lorna leaned her forehead against her hand, but at her mother's glance she thought better of that elbow on the table and sat upright again, while John muttered, "Just a little taste of pheasant, please."

(Nothing suits her, thought Hazel, when she comes out of her trance far enough to see us at all!) George, knife poised for a transverse cut, looked at his daughter. "You'd do well to learn how to make a pie like this," he said, tranquilly. "Your husband will appreciate it some day."

"He looks like a hearty eater, too," said John, very low. Hazel shook her head at him, and Lorna decided not to hear him.

"I can remember"—George served with a dexterous turn of the wrist—"when your mother's pies weren't like this."

"Why bring that up?" asked Hazel, her finger still smarting.

"Oh, well!" Lorna disposed of the argument. "Cooking's old-fashioned. You buy things in cans and boxes. Just listen to the radio!"

A sharp buzz of the front doorbell caught George with his mouth just opening for a homily upon the home, the hearth, the kitchen.

"That's probably for me—" but although Lorna pushed back her chair and flung aside her napkin, John beat her in a dash for the hall.

Hazel saw George glance at his daughter, his blue eyes candidly alarmed, saw him seal back a protest. He's worried, too, she thought, about that Daniels boy coming so often, although he won't say a word.

Lorna expected him; she poised at the edge of her chair, every nerve waving toward the front door, to catch his voice. They all heard John's "H'ryuh, Bo," and, "How long you been working there?" and then the door shut. John strolled back, exasperatingly slow, thumb and finger pinched at the corner of a yellow envelope.

"'Satelegram," he said. Lorna slumped. A telegram was adult disaster, and did not touch her suspense.

"Let's have it!" George reached for it. "Now who on earth—"

"It says Hazel Browning Curtis," said John, parting with it reluctantly.

Well, I don't know anyone who'd be dead, thought Hazel, and she opened it. It roared at her, each printed word, the room rocked up at a queer arc, and faintly she heard George, impatient, "Who is it? What does it say?"

"It says—" her lips were stiff—"it says I got it."

John stood behind her chair and read it aloud. "Delighted to offer you congratulations your book unanimous

selection of judges for award send photo wire biographical details immediately representative will fly west to arrange trip to New York presentation of check publication being rushed."

"That's a queer mistake," said George. "John, you better call up the office at once and tell them. There may be some other message for us."

Hazel's heart, buffeted by consternation and amazement, began to beat swiftly; the blood burned in her ears, her temples. "I don't think it can be a mistake," she said. "It says my name."

"But what—" George stared at her. ("What have you been up to that I don't know about," flickered in his eyes, a premonitory doubt of stability as if the earth's crust heaved slightly.) "Here, let's see it."

Hazel waved the sheet toward him, and pressed her fingers against her temples, trying to push back the flush of guilt, of shock. If only the news had come when she was alone! Giving her a minute to get used to it.

"Horn and Westerby," said George. "Never heard of them. Whose trip to New York? What book? If you know what it's about—"

"Yes, I know." Hazel took a long breath, to inflate the feeble squeak in which her voice had come out. "I must have got the prize. I didn't expect to."

"What prize?" asked George, and Lorna said, "Did you win a trip to New York? Why, *Mother*!"

"I won more than that," Hazel thought: I'll say it, and see if it's true. "I won the prize. Ten thousand dollars."

George's eyes were round and light blue, just the color of his broadcloth shirt, the pupils contracted to dots. John loped around the table to lean over his father's shoulder and stare at the yellow paper. "Ten thousand bucks! Oh boy oh boy oh boy!" he chanted.

"It doesn't say ten thousand," said George, slowly.

"That's the only prize there was." Hazel gave herself a little shake. There, she wouldn't cry. She'd been afraid she might. The paroxysm in her chest was quieting. "I thought I wouldn't say anything—I didn't really expect to get it."

"I don't understand yet what you did." George's expression of doubt thickened.

"I wrote a book. A novel." Hazel's color had subsided, her eyes were bright under the fringe of lashes, her pallor, the uncertainty of her mouth had entreaty. They all looked as if she'd suddenly stood on her head in the middle of the table! "You aren't any more surprised than I am," she said, and as her eyes met those of her husband's she caught a flash of the clairvoyance which lived at times between them. You shouldn't ever be so sure you know everything about me! She smiled at him.

"You mean these people"—he laid a finger on the telegram—"whoever they are—"

"They're publishers," said Hazel.

"Are going to give you ten thousand dollars for something you wrote out of your head?"

"Of course," said Hazel, "there's a good deal of work getting it out of your head." She had, suddenly, a new feeling, a tardy response to the stimulus of an unfamiliar drug. Her book had been selected. Unanimously. She, Hazel Browning Curtis, had written it! "Let me see that telegram!"

"I don't see when you found time."

"That's why you pecked away on that ole typewriter!" John dropped into his chair, his face screwed in dark concentration on this phenomenon in his own house. "Ten thousand bucks! Why, you're rich, Mother!"

"I haven't got a photograph, except that one with the children years ago. I couldn't wire biographical details.

What would I say? I think you might congratulate me! You haven't one of you—"

They did then, George adding stiffly, "If we'd known anything about it—have to get over the shock." Lorna thought it was like something in the movies, exactly! And wouldn't people's eyes stick out! George said he wouldn't say anything about it until they saw the check. Hazel did not notice until late that evening, when she cleared away the dishes, that he had scarcely touched his dinner. He had said, "Well, we ought to celebrate. But I promised two in-lays for tomorrow. Even if I've got a rich wife, I suppose I must go on working." Hazel went to the door with him. "You know," he said, slowly, "I knew you had something on your mind. I felt it. Only I thought for a while it was another baby. You were absent-minded, that way."

"Well, aren't you at least glad that wasn't it?"

"I don't know." George held his muffler in place with his chin as he jerked into his overcoat. "I'd understand that. But ten thous— Why, my best year I didn't clear— And never saying a word—"

Hazel's hand wavered upward. She wanted to poke a finger into the buttonhole of his lapel, to explain that her silence had been a lack of confidence not in him, but in herself. "I never expected to win the prize," she began.

"I'm surprised you confided that in us!" George drew himself stubbornly away from her finger. "Mere accident, perhaps, the telegram coming as it did."

"I hadn't made any plans." Hazel shivered as the raw January wind pushed around George's stiff figure into the warmth of the hall. It was too bad of George not to be whole-heartedly pleased— "How could I when I never expected—you're just surprised because you didn't think I was smart enough to do it!" She didn't know where her

sudden anger leaped from, the words curling like a wave over the blond rock of her husband's face.

"I didn't say that." He shrugged, and thrust his hands into pockets. "You needn't get mad just because I'm surprised. Only how—" his breath puffed out a great white feather in the frosty air, "however can I tell what else you're up to? But you're cooling off the whole house. Shut the door." And he strode with finality out of the range of light toward the car.

Hazel shut the door, hand braced against a desire to slam it. She ought to be high with excitement, delight, and instead George had done this to her. That was why she hadn't told him: She had known just how he would take it. She broke the thin string of accusations, seeing his face just before he had swung down the walk. Oh, poor George! The delicate, assured balance of their lives knocked suddenly out of kilter! A balance of expectancy, habit, knowledge. And she had been resentful, instead of wise. She'd heard that success was bad for people; was she already proof of that? She heard Lorna at the telephone, in the muffled effect of lips sealed against the receiver. As she walked past her daughter, the murmur ceased, and the blue eyes rolled up at her ingenuously. John sat at the dining-room table, one hand rustling in a large cracker box, the yellow telegram propped against his tumbler.

"Are you still hungry, Johnny?" Hazel glanced at the table. He'd had the rest of the gingerbread, and all the milk. But she hadn't noticed much about what he ate.

"I guess not." John munched. "Just thought I'd eat a cracker. Say, Mother, are you sure it's ten thousand dollars? It just says award."

Hazel opened a drawer of the buffet, and from under the imitation leather box for knives and forks took out a folded

paper. "You can read it," she said, and John frowned as he smoothed out creases and read the announcement.

"Maybe they won't pay it," he said, darkly. "Lots of those prize things are fakes. I knew a fellow and he drew the number for a car, but they gave it to someone in the firm. He never saw it!"

"Oh, but this is different!" Hazel's fingers closed over the telegram, and she read it slowly. "Books aren't like drawing numbers for cars! Why, a professor gave me that notice. He'd know if it was a fake! And here's my name and address—"

"John's just being smart, Mother!" Lorna was at the door, dark beret pulled toward one ear, coat over her arm. "Don't let him fizzle you."

"Just because I have brains enough to raise a question!" began John, but Hazel interrupted.

"Are you going out, Lorna? Tonight?"

"Why, I told you, Mother! We're meeting at Agnes' house to talk over the Senior play. I explained this afternoon. You must have forgotten, with all the excitement and everything." Lorna was forbearing, kind.

"Didn't you meet last Friday?" asked Hazel.

"Of course *one* meeting can't decide *everything* about a thing like that!"

"Not when you think who's there," said John in falsetto.

"You know—" Hazel hesitated. Lorna was so intrenched in righteousness, and her forbearance was so egg-shellish—After all, if George didn't want his daughter going out during the week, he might see to it himself! "That coat really isn't warm enough for tonight," she finished.

"I can't wear that other old thing!" Lorna tugged the coat over her shoulders, buttoned it with an air of drama. "Honestly, I'd rather freeze to death! *Mother!*" her face changed from its slightly reserved hostility into glowing

supplication. "Oh, Mother! I just thought—with all that money— Oh, could I have a fur coat? Could I?"

Hazel looked down at the yellow paper, and again, slowly, there expanded within her a bright bubble. Somehow, among them, they had almost obliterated the extraordinary fact that she, Hazel Browning Curtis, had won the prize!

"We'll see," she said, deliberately. "After I know more about this."

Lorna's hands, pulling the belt through the buckle, stopped, and her eyes stopped too, round, and almost thoughtful. "Would you rather I didn't go tonight? I—if there's anything—"

"Any little thing like a fur coat?" queried John, reaching for another cracker.

"Don't be late," said Hazel. Her hands, automatically, began to pile together dishes from the table. The silver clattered.

"Of course I said I'd be there," Lorna waited.

"Of course." Hazel pushed open the door into the kitchen, and blinked her lashes. It would be ironic if after all her care in handling Lorna, her tender noninterference, her attempts to erect invisible safeguards just to keep the child from blundering too early into what she thought was love, bribery should now prove effective. Lorna would stay home, if Hazel wished, with a fur coat in the offing! Money was a weapon Hazel had never had a chance to try. It might be stronger than words or wisdom. A reminiscent flush of embarrassment showed in Hazel's face as she poked her head through the shoulder loops of an apron. That night last week when she had tried to talk with Lorna! She'd been strictly contemporary, using bold and simple words about what a strong instinct sex was, and how it might blot out all the other interests that were important

for her development, and that would be all right if she belonged to a primitive tribe, but she had to think about earning her living, getting a proper education—Hazel had been proud of her little speech, and at the end Lorna had looked at her pityingly and said, "Of course, Mother, we belong to entirely different generations!"

She hadn't even been surprised that her mother had written a book! I suppose—Hazel turned the faucet and held a finger in the stream of water, testing the temperature—I was as self-absorbed as she is, at her age. Maybe I hid it better. I don't know. Lorna's like George, you know just where they are. George had been surprised. She clattered the dishpan into the sink. That water wasn't hot. Never was, unless the furnace was roaring. Why—she stood motionless, and the water purred over the edges of the pan. She could install a new heating plant, if she wanted to. That oil burner, automatic, that the agent had been so persistent about last summer. She could do anything she liked! Almost. Of course, at this very moment, whether she liked or not, she had to do dishes in lukewarm water. Was that a way to celebrate?

There should be someone to tell, someone who would say, "Marvelous! Wonderful!" Her mind clicked off a line of people, neighbors along the street, women in the church, in the literary society, girls grown older who had been her best friends when she was a girl. Queer, the way marriage altered your intimacies, absorbed whatever it was that ran out searching for friends. Turned you into a small principality with guards along the border. Well, it would come out in the paper, and then they'd all know. As George said, better wait until she had the check.

In the quiet kitchen, above the soft note of the water, the ticking of the porcelain clock grew louder. A queer, hard tone, the beat of metal under porcelain, like a premonitory

whir which might someday shiver the china into fragments. Hazel listened, her upper lip caught between her teeth, her eyes bright and rebellious. She didn't like that clock. It had run her life for too long, measuring her inefficiency against its methodical progress. Time you had those dishes done, it said right now! Hazel looked at the stacked plates. She didn't like them, either. George's mother had sent the set, not as a wedding present, just as an extra. "We don't need them, now the family is so small," she had written. "It will save you buying any."

Heavy, old-fashioned ware, with a design in yellowish-green which crawled and twined around the borders. George had been delighted. "Makes me feel at home," he had said. One of the hired girls who helped out a few weeks after the birth of Lorna or John had broken one plate. That was all. Hazel stared at them, the design began to swim around the plate, the clock had the vibratory tone of breaking china. Suddenly Hazel seized the pile, thumbs on top, fingers spread, held it well away from her body, and with a little push to help out gravity, dropped it.

John poked the door open and looked in, his face solemn. Hazel with her toe spun off the top plate, sole survivor among the shards.

"Migosh," said John, "another revolution in China!"

"I can buy some more," said Hazel.

The telephone burst into a prolonged and unnatural clangor.

"Gleeps!" said John. "They gone crazy, too?" He vanished, the ringing ceased, and in a moment John was at the door again, his thin face twitching, as if his air of non-chalance had grown too tight for his skin. "New York calling for Hazel B. Curtis," he paged her in his deepest tone, holding the door ajar.

New York calling, or Mars would like to speak to you.

Hazel slid past John, sat down at the telephone stand, and after an instant blew a somewhat winded "Hello," toward the mouthpiece.

"Is that you, Mrs. Curtis? Someone in New York *says* he wants to talk to you." That was Flora Robb, Jessie's oldest girl. Hazel had heard she was night operator. "At least they have your address."

"Yes," said Hazel firmly. Flora needn't sound so incredulous! Well, George's caution about saying nothing would do no good now, with Flora on the line.

"Here's your party."

The brisk, staccato voice was, as Hazel said later, just as clear as if he'd been right in the room. Yes, she was Hazel Curtis, yes, she'd written the book, yes, she'd had the telegram, yes, she was delighted. Something both stimulating and breathtaking in the rapid pelting of words. A little information for a news story to be released at once. Had she ever written before? What did she do? Oh, fine! Two children, husband was what? A remote voice interloped, words about three minutes, and the staccato bristled. How did you happen to write a book? (John had crept near, head bent as if he listened to New York.) Hazel floated above the earth, herself the golden bubble, even the intent and repressed astonishment in John's face a remote thing, caution quite gone. How had she happened to write—those lonely evenings, with George at the office— Any message, how you feel at winning the prize? What will you do with it? And now, Mrs. Curtis, we want you to drop in for a few days. We're rushing the book through the press, need you for publicity hints. No, we've decided it's much better for you to come to New York, meet all of us, sign contracts, of course you can manage, matter of paramount importance. Wire me, I'll meet you. What's that? Can't afford— Nonsense, you're rich. I'll mail you a check for expenses. Work

up radio and movie ends when you come. Congratulations.

The hall door opened as the voice ceased, and Hazel swung dizzily around on the stool, finger-tips tingling. George, both hands embracing a pyramid of green paper, kicked the door shut behind him. The kick jarred his hat forward, and he peered from under the brim with raffish suspicion. "I thought you weren't going to tell anyone yet."

"I wasn't." Hazel giggled. George did look comical! "He was telling me." (This must be like being drunk, she thought. It's a grand feeling!) "But he's going to put it in all the papers!"

"Was that the very guy that's handing you ten thousand bucks?" drawled John.

"How'd he get here so soon?" George pushed his chin over the crackling paper.

"New York calling, Dad. I bet Florabelle got an earful that time."

"I hope what I said was all right. Goodness, I can't remember what I did say! But how could I go to New York?" Whirling away from them, across a continent—"I could hire someone to come in— Oh, it's too—too—"

"Utter," said John. "Just too utter! That's the word."

George set down his parcel on the console-table, propping it against the wall. "I'll have to put up the car," he said.

"Lemme, Dad." John angled past him a whoop floating back as he slapped the door shut. George took off his coat, folded his muffler into a pocket, and opened the door of the hall closet, his movements deliberate and prolonged.

"I wish you could come to New York with me," said Hazel. "I'm not used to going places by myself."

"It sounds as if you would be," said George into the closet.

"Would you rather I just stayed here?"

"Of course not." George turned, and smiled, just a quirk

of the corners of his mouth. "I mean of course I would." He shoved the green bundle along the table. "I bought you that. They didn't have much to choose from. Maybe you won't want it—if you're going away."

Hazel pulled off the metal clips, folded away the noisy paper, the red azalea danced.

"Of course I want it!"

"He had some roses, but I thought this would last longer." George cleared his throat. "You—you didn't think I wasn't pleased, did you? I mean I just never thought of your writing a book, and then to have it turn out that it was my wife—"

He's trying so hard, thought Hazel, looking up from the red blossoms. She could see only the shadows cast by his quick and secret thoughts, in a shifting of tautness about his mouth, about his grave blue eyes. Not the thoughts. Never the thoughts themselves. Suddenly she stepped close to him, her hands slid between his arms and rigid body, clasped tight against his hard back. "Darling!" she said. His arms strained around her, urgent, and they kissed, the wryness of shock or fear or strangeness gone as their blood remembered all their knowledge of each other.

"You know"—Hazel sniffed, liking the faint clean odor, the cool firmness of his cheek—"I'd rather give it back than have it make any difference. It couldn't, now could it?"

"I hope not, old lady." George's embrace relaxed. "Not if you keep your head. You couldn't give back ten thousand. That's a lot of money."

Hazel withdrew slowly. Too bad, the way saying things changed your feeling—"Goodness!" she spoke briskly. "I haven't even finished the dishes! You put the plant on the living room table. I'll be through in a little while."

She slipped through the door into the kitchen, and

stooped to gather up the fragments of china. She didn't, suddenly, want George to see that mess. As the pieces clinked softly into the waste basket, she thought, and the back of her neck prickled, almost with fear, that perhaps it was a bad omen, this first gesture of hers. You'll always have to pick up the pieces, if you smash things, she told herself. But what a silly way to feel. As if good fortune was too much for her!

Hazel left for New York late in March, after three changes of the date. The first time John had the flu. He had pretended that he felt perfectly well, but at the very moment when Hazel kissed him good-by, she caught the unmistakable faint whiff of fever about him. Stripping off her gloves, she took his temperature, ignoring the awful faces he made. (Never worry about your children, her father had told her. Find out right away.) When she read the thermometer she asked George please to send a wire that she couldn't come. John hadn't been very sick, but only, she was sure, because she popped him into bed that minute. The second time the housekeeper left just as Hazel meant to go. George had something to do with it, although Hazel couldn't ask him what. "All I ask is a woman competent enough to take charge of things," he said. "I can't give up all my business, unimportant as it may seem to you, to look out for the children." The news stories had done that to George. Mr. Horn had played up the, "Wife seeks solace for lonely hours in writing. Beside the cradles of her sleeping children she composes great book. Domesticity palls upon this remarkable woman." The first time George read that he had been too outraged to listen to Hazel. By the tenth time Hazel had ceased any attempt to explain the difference between what she had meant and what the stories said. It was too bad they'd called George a strug-

gling young dentist. Hazel couldn't honestly blame him for being angry, but she blamed him for not believing her when she protested that she hadn't told reporters such things. George did drive her into the city for her train this third time when she made an actual getaway; a formal George who made comments on the state of affairs in Michigan as indicated by objects of the landscape. He left her at the stairs which led up to her track, and his kiss had the effect of chastisement. "When you come back," he said, "I hope I'll recognize you."

Hazel brushed away tears which burned her lids, and suddenly parting, blade-sharp, cut through the layers of awkward hostility, of self-reproducing misunderstandings, and she was in his arms. "Don't let anything happen to you while I'm gone! Oh, George, darling! I don't want to go."

"You're the one things will happen to. We'll be all right." But he kissed her again, and this time he loved her and reassured her.

"Nothing that will make any difference between us, will it? Say it won't. I couldn't bear it!" Never had she loved him more, the firm clip of his arms, the little wave of his chin as he tossed off too much emotion, the everything that was George.

"When you get this all over and settle down again—" A porter jostled them, climbing past with luggage, but the moment was gone, anyway.

"I don't want to settle down." Hazel folded her hands under her collar, pushing the soft beaver against her chin, and stared at George, her eyes startled. "I didn't mean that. I mean—but you know!" Challenge rang like a silver disk struck softly, clear under the hubbub of the station noises. We can't go back as we were, exactly, she was saying. But we do still love each other.

"You mustn't miss your train." George retreated into practical matters. "Send me a wire in the morning."

She couldn't sleep. There was, she thought, something appalling about a train trip. Surrendering yourself, giving up your freedom. You kept an illusion that you were free to make choices: you could eat dinner or go to bed early, but all the time you were being propelled through space, your destination fixed. Wasn't it a good deal like life, except that on the train you had at least chosen your destination? Who bought the ticket for life? Weren't you propelled along as inevitably, with as much illusion of freedom, through time instead of across miles of country? When she had started to write a book she hadn't said please give me a ticket away from George, and yet look! She wouldn't have thought George would take it as he had. But she couldn't be sorry she had done it! As the train rolled eastward George was diminished by more than space, and the next day, vague and brilliant, seemed to come to meet her minute by minute, just as she rolled toward it mile after mile.

After the first flurry of news stories, people in Lounsbury had acted almost as if nothing had happened. Except George. The Ladies Literary Society had thought it would be nice to have Hazel tell them about the book, but they had their meetings all arranged, and of course they hadn't read the book yet. Was it laid in the town, and had she put them in it? Insurance agents, numerous and persistent as English sparrows, had rung the telephone and doorbell, automobile salesmen, young men representing investment companies. It seemed silly to hide in one's own house, but Hazel tried that, instructing the new housekeeper to say that she was out. The woman complained that she couldn't do a lick of work for arguing at the door, and George came home one evening, stiff and cold with indignation. Two of

his patients had canceled appointments, one for herself, one for her little girl whose teeth George was straightening. Mrs. Wills and Mrs. Parsons. "They're insulted because you wouldn't see them when they called. Must you ruin my business, too?" Hazel had written notes to them, trying to soothe them, and Mrs. Parsons did bring back her child, as the brace had to be adjusted. Mrs. Wills said that some people couldn't stand good luck.

After that Hazel answered the bells herself, when she wasn't trying to decide which letters should have answers. Advertising letters, begging letters—(the world was suddenly crammed with worthy institutions for seamen, blind men, orphans, Lithuanian cripples, indigent actresses, and worn-out horses, all of which institutions would totter unless she remitted...) letters from women in Oklahoma, Alaska, Texas, and the Bronx who had written novels they wished to send her, letters from men in prison, in a lumber camp, on farms, in the haberdashery business who had plots for novels they would share with her, one dreadful note on brown paper threatening the children unless she mailed a thousand dollars to X B, General Delivery. George had taken that up with the police, and they had watched for a while to see if anyone claimed the envelope thus addressed. But as the officer said, "A real gangster wouldn't bother with chicken feed like that. Just some nut."

Weeks ago the crest of the flood had dropped, almost as suddenly as it had risen, and the postman no longer made his joke about needing an extra mailbag just for Hazel. She wondered whether someone in some other town had unwittingly made himself such a target. Even Mr. Horn ceased to wire or telephone so often. He was rushing the book through, proofreading it in the office to save time; he consulted her about various matters of which she knew

nothing, and Hazel caught the wind stirred by his rush even over the telephone.

She tried to fit the solid Pullman pillow between shoulder and cheek, tried to wriggle into comfort under the tight blanket. Here in the dark cubicle, with unexplained shafts of brilliant light striking at intervals under the drawn shade, she could admit that she had liked it. Not everything, of course. Like being transposed into a different key. Hazel, with variations. I wouldn't tell George that, she said. But I like it. And New York should be more exciting still, because that would concern the book itself, not just the prize. People would read her book. She hoped the dresses she had bought would be all right. As the clerk had said, black lace was always good. George couldn't have stood it if she'd bought that red dress with no back at all, although she had looked at herself for a long time before she let it slide down to the waiting hands of the saleswoman. She hoped her speech would be all right, too. She hoped she wouldn't be frightened. She hoped John and his father would get along while she was gone. Better, perhaps, than these past weeks while she was there, with George so edgy, and John so quick to catch moods.

And Lorna—Hazel frowned, a concentrated and baffled tenderness expanding through her body at the thought of her daughter. She must have quarreled with the Daniels boy. Queer, Hazel had worried about their intimacy, and yet when she saw the boy downtown with that red-headed Gwendolyn Baratsky, who had more reputation of the wrong kind than any other girl in town, she was furious. John ceased to tease Lorna, an ominous sign. Hazel tried unobtrusively to assure Lorna of support or sympathy or whatever she most needed. (At her age a heart, even broken, should heal quickly, like your bones.) But Lorna went about with a surface hard and prickly, resisting in-

trusion. She shut herself into her own room, and said she supposed they wanted her to do some studying, didn't they? She carried her secret, whatever it was, in a sort of fourth dimension, where no one could touch it. When Hazel said, "Don't you want to go to the movies?" or "Why don't you and Tommy go to the Club dance tomorrow?" Lorna had looked at her, and for an instant her fair, round, unchanged face had seemed a mask over lean torment. "When I want to go places, you and Father say I'm going too much, and when I want to stay home you won't let me alone." I just have to stand by, thought Hazel, waiting for contact. I'll get something for her in New York, a new dress.

The next morning she was the first passenger to appear as a finished and civilized product, being driven by anxiety lest the train arrive at Grand Central and she find herself ejected, like one of those dreams in which you walk down a street with your clothes over your arm! The porter found her a seat forward, beyond all the bulging green curtains, and she looked out at the great river running down in the sunlight as fast as the train, at patches of dingy snow, at gulls on old sunken piers, her fingers tense over her new brown purse.

"Take a taxi to the hotel," Horn had written. "I'll engage rooms for you there, and drop in early." It was strange to get off the train and know that not one of the people at the gate waited for her. Always George or the children waited for her, with that grand moment of recognition exploding like a Roman candle between them. Unless, indeed, George and the children were with her on the train. But the red-cap rushed her to a cab, and the cab rushed her in spurts to the hotel. New York wasn't unlike the other cities she knew, except perhaps that the chasms

of the narrow streets were deeper, cut sharper angles, and the blue sky was buttressed incredibly far above by towers extraordinary and varied. Her name, the name of Alfred Horn meant nothing to the hotel clerk, and Hazel searched in her bag for the letter. Surely he had said this hotel! "Will you please register, Madam?" Why, he had known, all the time! The bellboy whisked her to the elevator, the swift ascent reminded Hazel she had had no breakfast, their feet were silent on the deep nap past polished doors, and then the bellboy lingered, having indicated ice water, radio, phone. "Yes, it's a nice room," said Hazel, and then the persistence of his shrewd, pimpled face reminded her, and she opened her purse again. How much should you give him—she'd given the porter more than George said, because he seemed to expect it... oh, dear!... She found a quarter, and then a dime, and sighed as he withdrew with no excess of gratitude. Outside the windows lay New York, superimposed silhouettes, with shadow-accent, city haze dimming the sky color. Hazel gazed at the mulberry and blue of rug and hangings, the reddish cast of modern maple, she wondered how they made the pleats of the valance, and decided to unpack her dresses.

As she unlocked the case, the door trembled under a tattoo. Hazel opened it, and was swept back into the room by the influx of several men, Mr. Horn himself, a photographer, a reporter. Mr. Horn all but embraced her, holding both her hands. "Hazel Browning Curtis, at last! Well, well, this is wonderful! Just a minute for some pictures." The next hour was a blur of holding her head this way and that while silver bulbs exploded in silent dazzles, of answering questions, no she didn't know how she liked New York yet, no, she hadn't started another book (keep George out of it, she warned herself; don't mention George!), Mr. Horn seems very young, she thought. He'll wear himself

out, he's too intense. Then the photographer disappeared, the reporter folded up his sheets, and Mr. Horn said, "Now we'll go over to the office. I've made a luncheon engagement for you, good chance, Mrs. Canterbury's literary luncheons. One of her speakers fell down, and she'll tuck you in. She has a crowd of females, soaks 'em plenty, tells them about books, dames lap it up, don't have to read, see? They don't buy books, but Canterbury gets good notices."

"But I couldn't think up a speech—"

"You don't have to say anything. Get up and give 'em a look. Come along."

"But do I look all right?" cried Hazel, desperate to brace herself against the rush. Mr. Horn was worse than the train, the way he propelled her inevitably ahead.

"Why, yes." Mr. Horn looked at her, the crease deep between his bright, dark eyes. "Little brown wren from the Middle West. Yes, you're fine. We'll play up that aspect. Homebody."

Wren, in her new coat that even Lorna had said did things for her! But Mr. Horn wouldn't hear her if she told him what she thought of his wren. And when he stopped at the florist shop in the lobby, and bought a spray of gardenias tied with silver ribbon for her, she decided to say nothing about his bird lore.

The offices of Horn and Westerby seemed a trifle bare. Perhaps she had expected something more like a library, instead of this series of cubby-holes in and out of which moved men and young women, each with an air of being in a great hurry to reach some other spot before it was forever too late. Hazel sat beside Mr. Horn's flat desk, trying politely not to read any of the fascinating letters which littered the top, and meeting in such rapid succession that she never sorted them out the sales manager, the advertising man, the business manager, the publicity head, and

what else. The telephone rang often, and Mr. Horn, hooking the mechanism between chin and shoulder, talked into it and over it at the same time. Finally he said, "Well, that's about the line-up. Reviews ought to begin Sunday. If we get a good break— Is there anything else you'd like to ask?"

"Could I see it? The book, I mean?"

"Good God, haven't you seen it?" Horn pressed the buzzer. "*Didn't* we ship you some?" A thin dark girl in horn-rimmed glasses looked in; her glance at Hazel said plainly, what is a mere author doing here? "Bingham, get me a copy of the 'Hand,' willya?"

"If I can find one. We sent out all we had around."

"Well, find one. And order a bunch sent up here. Mrs. Curtis ought to sign a few."

Then for a few minutes he was intensely silent, looking over papers, and Hazel wondered whether only a homebody would ask to see her book. The Bingham girl came back, and Hazel had it in her own hands, her own book, *Your Hand Upon the Gate* in zig-zags above white palings on a red ground, a gold band sealing it, announcing the ten thousand dollar prize award. She was afraid she might cry, her throat hurt, but Mr. Horn said, "Take it along. Canterbury may not have a copy. Hold it up when you get up to talk. Pretty neat job, we think here at the office."

So Hazel held it through the luncheon, although she found it hard to keep her knees stiff enough to support bag and book. Mrs. Canterbury had swept up to her in peach lace, a gold cap on assisted-gold hair, her animation as applied as her lipstick. So sweet of Mrs. Curtis to consent to come, she hadn't read the book, but she would say all she could, and Mrs. Curtis could speak just a few words to the ladies. A remarkable group, highly intelligent. Then she swept away to project herself around a plumpish man with

white hair and a pink face, evidently her favorite guest. Hazel was seated well down the long table, between two women from the suburbs who talked across her, and across the table to the women opposite. If they knew I had a book, thought Hazel, they might talk to me. But as she swallowed tomato bisque, thick and not too hot, the dismal emptiness, partly physical, began to ease away.

The woman across stared at her, the wired bow on her turban quivering. "Aren't you one of the speakers?" she asked. "I didn't catch the name."

"Curtis," said Hazel.

Never heard of it, signaled the woman's well-pruned eyebrows. "We hoped to hear Stark Young today," she said. "Mrs. Canterbury is very good usually about taking up only the books you have to know about. My life is too full for reading, but I think when someone gives you a good digest it is really better than if you read the book yourself, because she can pick out just the salient points, don't you agree with me?"

Fortunately she did not wait for Hazel's answer, but turned her wired bow toward the woman on her left, and the two confided in undertones, while Hazel jabbed at her chicken à la king. For the first time in her life she felt the apologetic uneasiness of a performer. Because she had written a book she ceased to be one of the ladies lunching, and became a questionable part of the entertainment for which they paid. Getting up to speak would be exposing herself to all their arrows. But Mr. Horn said it would be good for the book. Her left hand spread over the smooth surface of the book, pressed it hard against her flesh. She had to stay.

The ladies adjourned to a reception room where gold chairs stood in rows before a low platform. Mrs. Canterbury strolled back and forth on the platform, fitting the gestures of her jeweled hands less to her words than to her

intended emotional effects, while she offered her digests of the books on her program. She was gay, very feminine, she made little jokes, she referred at times to the quality of her audience, she pattered briskly through the story, and at crucial points of deaths or lovers' meetings she quoted lines with elocutionary histrionics. She really works hard for her money, thought Hazel. Wouldn't the Lounsberry Literary Society love her! Hazel wound her ankles tightly together and clasped book and purse. What would she say when she had to stand on that platform? She tried to remember lines from the speech she had written for the dinner. They wouldn't do; she couldn't thank these women for giving her the prize!

Mrs. Canterbury swayed at the platform edge, hands extended gracefully.

"And now, Ladies, we have a little special treat. We hoped for Stark Young, but fate intervened, fate in the form of a teeny little flu germ. So we have a new writer. I can't tell you about her book, as I haven't read it, as I didn't know until this morning we would have the pleasure of hearing her. But since it has won a prize of ten thousand dollars I am sure we will all want to read it if only to see why it should be given so much money. I present Hazel Browning Curtis, who will tell us the story of—what is the title?" And to Hazel, in an undertone, as the latter rose, she said, "The ladies are getting a little restless. Don't talk too long."

Hazel didn't. As she collapsed in the taxi on the way to her own hotel, her face burning, her heart still racing, she was sure only that she hadn't talked too long. She scrambled through her mind, trying to hear echoes of what she had said. A spurt of anger had lifted her clear of the symptoms of stage fright, and she rather thought she had said that perhaps someone there would read the book out of curiosity,

as Mrs. Canterbury had suggested, and as she'd written the story she wouldn't bother to tell it over, there was the book, and she'd held it out, flaunting its gold band, and she didn't know how to make a speech, this was her first, and so she'd stop. Had she said thank you or not? Her mouth quirked at the corners. "My goodness, she got my dander up, as George would say. Now, see here!" She sat forward in the cab, her pulses calming. "Can't go 'round losing your temper. But acting as if she were doing me a favor, when I thought I was the one—"

She decided that if she moved fast she could bathe and dress before Mr. Horn called for her. Quarter to five, he had said. A cocktail party. She supposed she couldn't wear the black lace. She'd have to come back again to dress for dinner. She wished she had bought that red one, just to dispose of the wren idea. She was in the tub, having scrubbed it thoroughly with her wash-cloth (how did she know who had last used it?) when the 'phone rang. She popped out, seized a bath towel, and left a trail of damp prints across the mulberry rug. Mr. Horn calling. Was she ready?

"I thought you said quarter to five!"

"I got wind of another tea. For an English author, but we'll drop in. Bound to meet some people there."

"I'm taking a bath," said Hazel.

"Bring it right along! How soon can you make it?"

"Five minutes."

She did, too. Being a mother was good training in speed at one's toilet. The gardenias had brown smudges on the outer petals, but Hazel repinned them to her coat. She powdered her nose, and wondered whether she might buy a lipstick, just to use in New York. George always liked her own color better, but of course he had such close-ups of mouths.

At midnight Hazel closed the door of her hotel room, brushed back her hair with a slow, heavy hand, and sank down on the bed. Someone had turned down the blankets. Nice. If ever she could stir again! She did not feel tired, so much as extinguished. Blotted out, scattered, lost. As if, presenting herself again and again to all these strange men and women, hostile or indifferent or bland or self-absorbed, none of them coming out to look for her, some of them cagey, suspicious (don't think you'll get me to write you a good review by smiling at me!), she came at last to non-existence, annihilation. The teas were easier than the dinner, although just as annihilating, for when Horn convoyed someone up to meet her—most of the names she didn't understand—the someone murmured, "Ah, Horn's prize!" or "How do you like New York?" and then hailed an acquaintance or strolled off toward the bar. One darkish man seemed friendly, and asked whether she was at work on a second book. Just as they had begun a real talk, Horn dragged her away. "Has he got you signed up yet?" Mr. Horn's cocktails had accelerated his ordinary tempo. "Biggest pirate in town, steals authors under their publisher's nose." At the second party, which a literary agent, a friend of Horn's, was giving for him and his author, Hazel thought she met again some of the guests from the first. But she wasn't sure. Her face had stiffened, her mouth felt dry from too many smiles, but she found corners of tables and windowsills where she could set down the cocktails presented to her whenever anyone observed her without one.

At the dinner, however, she had to sit at the speakers' table, and try to talk. On one side sat Mr. Carlton, a member of the committee which had chosen her book, and Hazel, although partially extinguished, had thought, he at least must have read it. But when she said she was glad to meet him because he had liked her book well enough to select it,

he stared at her gloomily, the light strong on his forehead, and said, "Don't thank me. Now I suppose you'll write another. Or perhaps"—a spark through his gloom—"you're one of these one-book authors."

"I don't know," said Hazel. "I haven't thought of another one yet." Then, slyly—she couldn't help it, he looked so cross—"Would you mind if I did?" (After all, someone had to write books if a critic kept his job!)

"Mind? Oh, no. Not at all." (Nothing in his life!) "You know, I've been considering a project. I think authors should be licensed before they can practice. Like doctors, or lawyers." The tip of his thin nose twitched, and he stroked his chin thoughtfully. That idea would do for a column. "Board of examiners, penalties for illegal practice—why hasn't it been done long before?" He turned to the woman at his left, and Hazel heard him repeating his proposition with sardonic elaboration. Mr. Horn explained later, in a rapid two-minute survey of the evening before he handed Hazel into her taxi: "That's just Carlton's line, being rude to authors. Likes to bully 'em. What he said about your book wasn't bad. Some quotable phrases. Couldn't very well pan it when he helped pick it. Never heard him enthusiastic about anything except a treatise on the family life of the three-toed sloth. On the whole the evening was a great success. You made a nice little speech."

"I didn't know it was going to be broadcast. I was frightened." That awful disk, set up between her and all the staring eyes! If she'd known, she could have told John to tune in.

"One of my last minute breaks. One of the things I do best, getting breaks that way. Get a good rest. I'll give you a ring in the morning."

Hazel pushed back her coat and let it lie in a mound around her. She hadn't thought of needing a real evening

wrap. In Lounsberry everyone just wore a winter coat because it was so cold at night, but here even the new beaver collar looked—well, all right! wren-like—among velvets and ermine, even if the ermine was rabbit. Not that it made any difference. “If I’d been a Hottentot princess in beads maybe someone would have seen me. I’m not sure.” But in her handbag was the envelope, heavy cream, with her name, and inside it an engraved slip. Not the real check. “I’ll give you that tomorrow,” Horn had said. “Have to figure out the deductions I’ve advanced.” And on the table beside the bed lay the book.

Hazel reached for it, the black lace falling away from her arm. Her dress had been all right, she thought, although not striking— She turned the volume slowly, and slid the gold band carefully off. Then she opened it. She looked at the first page, and the printed words spoke to her in her own voice. Reading them was like life flowing back into her, it was like writing them again, and yet different, almost creation in reverse. She turned the page and read the next, wondering how she had happened to say just that, and yet feeling the words drop softly, rightly, as if she held within her the archetype from which they had been made, and each word fitted into its own place.

A long time later Hazel closed the book. She didn’t know really whether it was good or not, not being able to tell how much was there in words to reach other people, and how much was in her own feeling. But she had written it, and for the first time she had read her own book. It’s not like having a child, she thought, with sudden scorn for that old comparison. A child is separate from you right away, and a book— She laid the volume on the table. It’s more like ectoplasm, it seems to be separate, there it is, and here I am, but it’s really me, all the copies everywhere. She wondered, in alarm, what she had been up to, scattering

herself in pieces all over the earth! But she did like that last scene, where the restless-footed one of the third generation came home at last, and the woman he loved welcomed him, her hand upon the gate. She'd always liked the poem.

Her foot had gone to sleep, and she hobbled across to the dresser, unclasping the string of pearls (George's present last Christmas: he'd said he wished he could give her real ones, but these were pretty good). She poked them, still warm, into a double circle, and stamped on her prickling foot. She must get to bed, or she'd look dreadful tomorrow. She did now, with smudges under her eyes and a mazed whiteness on her face. Presently, her purse safe under her pillow and the table lamp drawn so close she couldn't miss it in the dark, she lay small and flat in the strange room, and looked out at the amber haze which filled the sky, a haze which was not steady but fluctuated to the rhythm of flashing signs and beacons.

Mr. Horn telephoned the next morning. He was rushed, number of things just came up, but he'd made an appointment for her with Grawn, an agent, to talk over movie possibilities. Just run over and have a chat. "Don't commit yourself to anything. See what he says. I'll take care of any actual offers. Then drop in here at the office. A few advance reviews have come in. Um, fair. Fair."

Hazel waited for a long time in an outer office, with engrossed and oblivious people rushing past her until she suffocated under the dull cloak of invisibility. She peered at herself in a small mirror. She'd bought a lipstick that morning and tried it; now she wasn't sure it helped. At last a bored young woman escorted her down corridors and into Mr. Grawn's office. He sat with a dingy window at his back, a little man with a large head gray-crested, and a slow, deep voice.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Browning. Horn suggested I see you. Just what have you in mind?"

"Nothing," said Hazel, trying to arrange herself easily on the hard chair. "Mr. Horn told me to come."

"Ah, yes, let's see, your book is going well, is it?" His small, white hands moved slowly among papers, found a memorandum. "*Your Hand Upon the Gate*. I don't believe that title would sell. Ah, yes. Prize book, Horn says he's launching big publicity campaign. Frankly, Mrs."—he glanced at the memorandum—"Browning Curtis, it would be well to wait. If the book is a smash hit, we can work up good bids for it. Otherwise, I may say the motion picture business is incalculable. No one can prophesy. Why, I could tell you—" And then for what seemed hours to Hazel, blinking her eyes against the light, seeing Mr. Grawn's stiff gray crest prismatic, he did tell her, stories of books he had sold, of books he had not sold, of fabulous prices, of extraordinary rivalries, until he ended, accusingly, "If it had been serialized, that would help. You could, of course, run out to Hollywood? If the book is a hit, I often place authors. Say five hundred a week, to begin with? It's valuable experience for a time. You mustn't stay too long, though, or you lose your public. Nice of you to drop in."

Hazel, dropping down down in the elevator, wasn't sure whether she would find herself in Hollywood when she walked out upon the street. It was still New York, and she asked a traffic policeman how to reach the offices of Horn and Westerby, if she walked. If she went under her own power, she might step out of the Alice-in-Wonderland daze. Five hundred a week. How could she go to Hollywood? Anyway, who had asked her to go? Three blocks over, five up. But walking in New York was not like walking in Lounsberry. Her usual firm, smooth stride, which

could shake nonsense out of her mind, turning into dodging and delays. It's not really walking, she thought, it's wriggling through.

Again she waited, although not so long, in the triangular little reception room at Horn and Westerby's, watching the telephone girl shift plugs and say "Who's calling? Just a moment, please, Who's calling? Just—" Mr. Horn burst into the room, seized her hand, ushered her swiftly along the corridor. Had she seen Grawn? Of course, it was just a wedge. An opening attack. Oh, Grawn never read anything! You bet he'd grab it if it showed signs of going over big. Now she must look at the lay-out for the ads. He whisked smooth sample sheets past her, rattling off names, the *Times*, the *Tribune*, some of the trade journals, these little ones for daily papers. Hazel's color deepened. All those about her book! "Of course, Mrs. Curtis, a publisher can do only so much. He can launch a book, and we're doing a big job on the launching. After that, it's up to the book. Word of mouth is what does it. If people like it—get to talking about it— If you have any suggestions, any original publicity— I'm sorry to say some of the reviews aren't as whole-hearted as they might be. Trouble with a prize novel, reviewers like to say why in the name of God was this book chosen! Don't mind them. I suppose you'd like to look them over? This one's the best. Good selling review. Tells the story, see, catches interest, calls it good wholesome book of familiar type. Carlton comes out and says he preferred *Alley Cat*. That was runner-up, going to put it out next week. Here, look 'em over." He pushed toward her a pile of clippings and blue-penciled sheets. "Remember, a panning's better than no attention. May start talk. Yes, Bingham?"

The secretary's spectacles glinted at Hazel. "You here

again?" they suggested. Aloud she said, "Mr. Smith says he has an appointment with you."

"So he has." Horn jumped up. "I'll leave you here, Mrs. Curtis. Amuse yourself."

When, an hour or so later, he came back, Hazel was sitting straight and still beside the desk, on which she had ranged the papers, her eyes dark with bewilderment under the thick lashes, petals of vivid color on her cheek-bones. Mr. Horn's tentative glance investigated her mood.

"Mr. Horn," she asked, "did you by any chance read my book?"

"Why, yes, certainly. Of course." He flung himself into his chair, lighted a cigarette. "You smoke? No."

"What did you think of it?"

"Damned good book, of course. Now don't let some of those cracks disturb you. I never knew an author yet who could take criticism. Have to take it. Part of the game."

"Are you sure these are all about my book?" Hazel pointed at the clippings. "I thought maybe they mixed up the titles."

Horn jackknifed into a sudden laugh. "Say, that's rich!" he shouted. "That's a good one on reviews!"

"I wasn't sure. They blame me for so many different things I thought there might be a mixup." She shivered, as if she had been driven confused and stumbling down a long gantlet where men cracked whips of phrases as she fled. No book ignoring the social and economic problems of the present deserves consideration. Style is spontaneous and fresh, but plot is hackneyed. Style is labored with affectations of modernity, although the plot has originality. Another family cycle; surely the time has come when we might be spared this banal repetition. Refreshing to find an authentic picture of the American scene, although the characters unfortunately are mere wooden types. The char-

acters have a three-dimensional vitality; it is a pity that the action is nothing but moralizing, a projection of Miss Curtis' ideas of good and evil. The book has promise; the prize will give it undue attention, and no doubt destroy the author's future growth. Carlton's column had been the worst, perhaps because she had met him, and could hear him saying the words as she read. "There was another entry, virile, salty, full-bodied, with the tenacious hold on life hinted in the title, *Alley Cat*. Not a pretty little book to win a prize. But Horn and Westerby, having presented the circulating library readers with a chocolate marshmallow, may put themselves on the publishing mat with a real book. Watch for it."

"Anyway"—Hazel thrust out her chin, her upper lip drew down long and Irish, her color deepened—"I did get the prize! Even if it made them mad. That's the way they sound, just mad!"

"Sure," said Horn, "they're all frustrated novelists. Don't let 'em worry you. Now, what have you got on for this afternoon?"

You couldn't say nothing to a question like that. Hazel shook her head.

"I have to run out of town. Terribly sorry."

(Golf, thought Hazel. Or fishing. She knew that masculine air of inevitable, foredoomed preoccupation.)

"I thought you might like to shop, look around a little. The office is closed Saturday, of course. But Monday is a full day. In the morning I want you to see a pair of the cleverest radio agents in town. Fleeman and Flower. Chance to do a program for them. One of their biggest clients is looking for something new. In the afternoon you're to autograph books at one of the department stores. I've got the girls here all lined up to drop in at intervals, get a book, get it autographed, suggest there's a big de-

mand, see? We can use 'em later. Why don't you look around for a place to settle here in town? You might as well stick around."

"But I've got a family," said Hazel.

"Bring 'em along. Good thing for a writer to be here on the ground. Get to know the right people."

"My husband wouldn't leave his business." Hazel braced her heels on the floor. If she didn't watch out, Horn's dynamo would have whirled her forever away from Lounsbury and the three there. She would be a star sucked out of her proper constellation by his velocity, and go spinning alone in the dry unreality of his orbit.

"He's a dentist, isn't he? Hm. Might be openings here. I wouldn't know. Out of my line. You aren't planning to leave him, then? Not that divorce or separation is much use as publicity. Too common. But more than one woman when she pulls off a big thing of her own finds it makes a difference."

Hazel set her teeth into her lower lip. It wouldn't do to tell her publisher that he was impertinent. Anyway, his inquiry had a terrible impersonality, quite as if she were a horse he had entered for a race, and he looked at her teeth, ran a hand over her hocks.

"Let's see." He flung out his wrist, read his watch. "Why don't you run down to Atlantic for the week end? I can telephone for a reservation. Now, why isn't that an idea?"

"No." Hazel got to her feet quickly, before he shipped her off. "You needn't have me on your mind. I'd much rather stay here. Only I'd like some of my money."

Mr. Horn's face changed; he became almost husbandly. "Certainly. Now, you've had five hundred. I suppose if I give you the rest, you'll spend it before you leave town!" He wagged a finger at her.

"I'd like a thousand now," said Hazel with dignity. She hadn't meant to ask for so much, but he drove her to it.

After further persiflage Mr. Horn arranged to deposit it for her, and wrote out a card of identification. "Not a bad little publicity stunt, prize author goes shopping. See if I can't get one of the sob sisters to do a story. I'll be seeing you Monday, then. Have a good time, and don't buy Brooklyn Bridge!"

Hazel went back to her hotel, and as she ate luncheon she wrote on a slip of paper the names George, Lorna, and John, with dotted lines after each. A dress for Lorna. A watch for John, a good wrist watch, something like Mr. Horn's. For George—he'd like something for the office. She found the telephone directories in a long corridor of booths, and studied the Red Book until she had several addresses. The desk clerk, being urged, indicated which one was not too far from the hotel, and presently Hazel had convinced a supercilious young woman in an outer office that she was in earnest about buying a piece of dental equipment, and followed a tall, thin salesman into the show rooms. She wanted something quite expensive. No, she wasn't a dentist, her husband was. No, not in town, in Lounsberry. That was in Michigan. (Still there, solid and familiar, in spite of these strange days!) He had a good office chair. And an X-ray. In the next room she stopped, entranced, as if George stood beside her, and all his delight in perfect mechanism flowed into her. "These are the newest units, chromium and a new treatment of steel." Marvelous shining robots, with hinged and crooked elbows, dazzling metal threads through intricate wheels. The salesman swung the arms, turned a button and the drills sang and water gurgled. "You can spend as much as you like, depending upon the accessories." She was one with George again as she signed the check and arranged for the ship-

ping. Just as quickly as possible. Freight was too slow. Express. She wished it might go by air-mail.

Lorna's dress was easy, and John's watch, and when at the end of the day Hazel returned to the hotel she was thoroughly happy. She could even stand being called a chocolate marshmallow! She bought an evening paper, and rode up to her room. For a time she sat at the window, watching the geometric silhouette of the city flatten against the sky, the sharp forms merging into dimness, light-pierced. Then she spread the paper open on her knees. At the third page she stopped, the sheet crackling in her fingers. "Prize-winning Housewife Visits City." It stared up at her, shadowless, blanched by the flashlight, startled, a picture with her name beneath it. Hazel read through the article, a half column. Then she re-read it, her face white as anger closed a tight hand over her heart, her breathing. At least, she thought, George would never see it. Nobody at home would see it. "Modest, pleasant little middle-aged housewife comes to city to claim prize. From hamlet nestling in hills of distant Michigan—" I suppose they think we have Indians and buffaloes—"Slight air of distracted anxiety, as she thinks of babies she has left for this momentous trip." Hazel folded the paper, picture inside, and thrust it into the wastebasket. "Somewhat dazed by the city, by the whole adventure, she finds herself figure in fairy tale." I never said that! "She thought it would be nice to write a book, and here she is! We can see housewives all over the land hearing of her good luck, neglecting pots and pans to dash off best sellers."

"I'm not middle-aged! I'm not modest. I—I certainly don't feel pleasant!" Hazel confronted her reflection in the mirror, and color ran up her soft throat into her face. She wondered who wrote the article. One of those smart, hard young things at the dinner last night. "It's dreadful,

having to know how I seem to strangers, who don't know me, don't care—" She looked about the room, her anger changing subtly into desperation. Suppose she had to stay here always, with such articles, or such book reviews all she had! She would cease to exist, that was all. She wouldn't be herself any longer, because no one would know what she was. She moved swiftly to the telephone on a stand; she couldn't even stop to sit down.

"I want an out-of-town number," she said, her voice urgent. "In Michigan. Lounsberry. Two eight six three. No, I'll speak to anyone there."

"What's your room number?" and then, "I will connect you with long distance."

Listening, Hazel heard the quick calling of exchanges across the country, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, each transporting her nearer home, strides on seven-league boots across the land.

"Here's your number!" and then John's voice, his blessed telephone voice, affecting boredom, the quality thinned a trifle. Tears in her eyes, in her throat. "It's Mother, John!"

"Why, hello!" His drawl quickened. "How are you? Say, you sounded swell on the radio. Dad saw in the paper about the broadcast, and we all sat up."

"You did! Are you all right, John?"

"Sure. How's ole New York?"

"Oh, it's fine. Is Father there?"

"No. He went in town to a meeting."

(He hadn't said anything about a meeting—)

"And Lorna went off as soon as she ate her dinner."

"Where did she go?"

"I dunno. Ketch me asking that gal anything."

"Poor Johnny, all alone!"

"Well, I got my hat on, all set for the movies. Some of the fellows are going."

"Don't be too late, will you dear. It's not long since you were sick." Hazel closed her eyes, her fingers tight over the instrument, straining for each inflection of his voice. She could see him, thin shoulders hunched as he bent toward the telephone there in the hall.

"Say, when you coming home?"

"Very soon. Next week."

"Not till then?"

"I have to do some things Monday. I have to see some radio men, John! Maybe they'll give me a job. And perhaps I'll be in the movies." She laughed, and the excitement she had not felt suddenly prickled through her veins as she offered it to John. "But I'll tell you all about it soon. Good night, Johnny. Tell Father and Lorna I'm sorry they weren't home."

She held the receiver hard against her ear until the click which followed his "So long" broke the thread between them. She felt better. Like having her foot go to sleep, the way these two days had made her feel, and John's voice sent blood racing so that her own self woke up. She wouldn't let them get her down again.

Monday evening Mr. Horn escorted Hazel to the Wolverine, although he protested her departure. "To be sure, there weren't many customers at the bookstore, but you can't rush things. If you'd stay a few weeks—"

Many, thought Hazel. Two, besides the girls from the office who had pretended to be customers, and she'd sat on that chair for three hours. "If you really need me, I could come back. But I don't want to stay now." She had been stern with herself on Saturday and Sunday, buying a little guide book and booting herself over town to see what a visitor to New York should see, but she wasn't going to put in any more days paying solitary visits to fishes at the Aquarium or marbles at the Museum. She was going home.

Mr. Horn advised the porter about the placing of her bags. On the seat beside her he piled a large box of candy, all red cellophane and bows, a smaller glossy florist's box, and several magazines. Then he lolled against the arm of the seat, knee up, ears pricked for the "All aboard," which would release him. "I hope you've had a good time," he said. "'Sbeen a pleasure to meet you. You try a few scripts for Fleeman and Flower, and I'll see if I can get a contract out of them. Of course they felt, too, that you ought to stay here, be on hand for conferences."

"I couldn't do what they want," said Hazel, and for a moment Mr. Fleeman's face swam out from the green plush of the opposite seat, coming too close to hers as it had in the morning interview, black velvet hair, deeply lined white skin, sharp beak. "Something like Amos and Andy, only not colored, with a touch of Eddie Cantor, a few old songs thrown in (people like hymns), a real heart interest, and perhaps room for a touch of amateur hour."

"They don't know what they want," said Horn, briskly, "except they know what's pulled the best the last year or so. All those radio guys are crazy, but if you give 'em something good they'll pay real money for it. You try."

Hazel had her face set toward home. Although the train had not yet moved, she had already surrendered herself to the journey, and Horn's words danced like the final faint notes of a fantasia terminating with the wind instruments.

"Don't worry about your book," he was saying. "We're backing it with all we've got. Well, happy landing!" He pumped her hand, and was gone.

Hazel arranged her coat and hat neatly on the opposite seat. She untied the metallic cord and peered into the florist's box. More gardenias. She'd give them to Lorna, if they lasted until morning. She opened one of the maga-

zines, turning the thick, smooth pages of advertisements until she reached an illustration. Posed against a pillar, a stairway winding below her to nothing at all, urns and palms behind her, incredibly tall and slender and arching backward, one arm above her head, so that the satin sheath of gown caught highlights on every curve she owned, stood a girl, her eyelids inscrutable not with the weight of ages of sin, like Mona Lisa, but with well applied eyeshadow. Hazel stared at the photograph. Now that, she thought, is the way you're supposed to look. What it really is, is just a picture a man took of a girl in a dress that wasn't even her own, a girl from some small town who had that kind of figure. Like that girl Lorna knew who got a job modeling. The train was moving now, and Hazel leaned back, hands folded on the magazine, her face close to the window. If she could put her finger on it, she'd know something about New York that was like that photograph. The New York she'd seen, at least. For here, outside the window as the train climbed above street level and pried its way between dingy, close-pressing apartment buildings, was another city, washing flying on a fire-escape, a woman leaning with elbows on a dirty cushion, and then as the train gathered speed, too quick a winding past of interiors for Hazel to see anything but lights which marked rooms where people lived. She sighed. The whole fantasia of the past days, with its abrupt rhythm, its dissonances, was growing very faint. Later she might decide what it all meant. But if she'd known what happened when you wrote a book—no, not when you wrote it; when you had it published, when you took a prize! She could see dark water now, and great advertising signs flooded with light, and dimly on the window the shape of her own face. She thrust out her chin, and worried a little at her lip. She'd do it again.

Horn walked jauntily through the station. It was late, but Millbeau, the salesman for the eastern territory, had agreed to wait for him. Like to run over the order sheets with him, tell him about the campaign for *Alley Cat*. The "Hand" wasn't going to do much here in the East. Carlton had crabbed it, but he'd have to howl for the "Cat," he'd committed himself. Out in the sticks the "Hand" might move better. Women like Hazel ought to go for it, prize band on it and all. But he'd cut the advertising, at least till reorders started. Jeese, was he glad to be rid of that woman! He paused a moment at the curb, snapping his fingers, eyeing a girl that passed, her tight dark dress catching the good line from thigh to knee. Not that she wasn't a good sort, nice eyes, if she knew how to use 'em. But personally he didn't fall for that flower of the field type. Didn't get on with 'em. Something appalling about that kind of naïveté. Probably never see her again. Didn't think she had another book in her. If he didn't get his money (Westerby's!) back on her, he would on *Alley Cat*. First book sweet and pure, second strictly modern and soiled, good beginning for the firm. Then he had at least another half dozen manuscripts he could spread over the summer and fall, if nothing better came in. Just as he'd thought, the prize had been good bait, giving them a quick choice for their list, even if Westerby'd been skeptical about the sales value of a prize. "Make it a million, someone'd hear you. Ten grand? Bah!" And Horn had snapped, "What you think this is, a relief project?" That had tickled Westerby. He knew how to handle him! Then Horn darted across the street, swinging his arms in excess motion, jostling the crowd as he hurried, his nostrils wide, his face shifting in quick grimaces, all the superficial aspects of the city, the brilliance of the shop windows, the concentrated

drive of the crowds, the rhythm of traffic the stimuli which nourished him.

Hazel had not wired that she was coming home. The children would be in school, and George would not like to leave his office. She took the bus out from the city, watching with content the familiar, flat country wheel past, fields winter-brown, farm dooryards muddy, the only hint of spring some quality in the sunlight, as if the angle at which it struck meant a stirring in the earth. The bus stop in Lounsberry was just across from George's office. She wanted to see him so much that she felt in every muscle the climbing of his stairs, the pushing open of the door. And then she'd find someone waiting in his office, thumbing over a magazine, and George, white-coated, bending over a patient in the chair. Their meeting must be more than that! No interference. No static! But how to get home? She could telephone the Murphy boy. If he were home, he'd come for her. As she turned toward the grocery store, Bill Pakaloupus, the owner's son, came out, arms full of bags and baskets, the morning orders.

"Morning, Mis' Curtis. "He bobbed his head. "Just going out to your place. You going away?" He saw her luggage.

"No, I've been," said Hazel. She glanced at the Pakaloupus car, a battered sedan converted into a truck on weekdays by removing the rear seat. "Could you give me a lift, Bill? I don't want to bother Dr. Curtis."

"Sure. Climb right in."

Hazel did, her eyes bright with amusement. Famous author comes home.

"I seen a woman at your house Sattiday," said Bill, as he clattered around the corner. "I thought mebbe you was sick."

"No. I've been to New York."

"Yeuh? Was you down on Washington Street? The old man lived there when he first come across. Guess you're glad to be back, ain'tcha?"

Hazel hung on to the rattly door-frame as they swooped up the street.

"Can't waste time." Bill grinned, his teeth white in his swarthy face. Then when he swung into the driveway at the Curtis house and stopped, with all the groceries bouncing, he refused Hazel's money. "Ain't you one of our good customers? 'Sa real treat to have company." He carried her suitcase to the front door, and disappeared around the house with a basket.

The front door was locked, and Hazel waited. Bill backed out of the yard, waving to her, and presently the house-keeper opened the door. "Why, Mrs. Curtis!" Her high, firm bosom pumped reproachful breath through her words. "I didn't know you were coming home today!" She was larger than Hazel, with an effect of polish on the planes of her wide, hard face.

"No, I didn't send word," said Hazel, managing to enter her own house. "Everything all right?"

"The Doctor said he wouldn't be home for lunch, and the children said they'd get something at the drugstore because it was too far to walk and so I never planned a thing for this noon because all I ever take is a cup of tea."

"I'll call up my husband," said Hazel. "I guess you can find something."

She waited until Lizzie's broad and still reproachful rear had vanished into the kitchen. Then she called George. Yes, this was Hazel. No, she wasn't calling from New York, she was home! And George said, "For heck's sake, why didn't you let us know?"

"I knew you'd be busy this morning." Hazel swallowed

a thistle before she went on. "You've got the car, haven't you? Can't you pick up John and Lorna, and come home for lunch?"

"Of course I want to see you! But I didn't know you'd be here. I made arrangements—if I can get hold of the party, I'll let you know. But it's pretty awkward." And then, almost caustically, "Have you had a grand time?"

"Oh, yes. Wonderful. Don't bother about lunch." Hazel held the instrument at a distance, hating it. "I'll see you tonight."

"It's not that lunch is a bother, Hazel. Please be reasonable. How could I know when you were coming? You told John you didn't know—" After a moment's pause he went on, and now his voice had lost its self-vindicating tone, had grown crisply professional. A patient must have come into the office. "The party I have the appointment with isn't in town yet, but if I can get hold of them, I'll explain. But it's a piece of business. Quite important."

"Well," said Hazel, "if I have to have a tooth pulled, would you have time to see me?"

"What's that? Is that tooth I filled bothering you again?"

She laughed. "No. *That's* not bothering me. See you later."

Ridiculous to feel such disappointment. She knew how George disliked suddenness or change. He planned his day, and he wanted it to go by schedule. He planned his life—and what a jolt she'd given him! Her mouth was soft and contemplative, and the pencil in her fingers drew a row of little birds with cocky tails and stiff legs, a row that marched across the cover of the telephone directory. Suppose he never accepted the jolt. She bent her head a trifle, evoking the quality of his voice. Clear, fresh, each syllable, each word distinct; it's a blond voice, thought Hazel. No

shadows. But strong, like sunlight. She had heard it all these years, and never thought before how precisely George it was. Things have got to be all right, she told herself, ignoring the way a shred of apprehension clung to her mood, for all she brushed away her disappointment.

She considered telephoning to the school. But John and Lorna would not have time for the long walk home, and perhaps they, like George, had made dates for their sandwiches at the drugstore counter. She'd been gone only—she counted off the days on her fingers—five days, and when she came back, she found the pattern so changed it didn't include her at all! What would happen if she went to Hollywood? But women did do things like that, lots of them. She heard Lizzie stomping about overhead, her feet expressing annoyance that Hazel had taken advantage of her, arriving unheralded before the roomwork was done. Better wait till she's through, thought Hazel. The living room was in stiff order, the small rugs each in the wrong place. Hazel moved about quietly, changing the rugs, pulling chairs out from the wall, until the room was hers again. She glanced over the mail piled on a corner of the table, advertisements, circulars, letters from three clipping bureaus enclosing several of the reviews she had already endured. Then she carried her bag to her own room and unpacked, alert for signs of what George had been doing these five days. He must have worn his new gray suit today. The blue one needed pressing; she'd call the tailor. Then she saw, on the lower shelf of the night stand between the twin beds, her book! Her heart gave a thud, and she couldn't move. An end of the gold prize band showed; George had marked his place with it. Where had he got it? And what, dear God, what did he think about it? Imagine him lying there, turning page after page in his slow, deliberate way, George, who never read anything except the

paper and his dental journals! He might have said something, when she telephoned.

Her hands trembled as she hung away the black lace dress, the new silk dressing gown. She took off the brown silk, and buttoned herself into a clean linen frock. She peered into the bathroom cabinet. Those cold tablets had been moved. Now which of them— Still seeking news, she went into John's room. The brown rep curtains hung in straight folds, the brown and yellow cover was spread smooth on the bed, a few books stood between the bronze lion bookends she had given him Christmas. His neckties were a stringy jumble in the top drawer. She sat down on the bed, crossing her ankles, and her heel struck something hard. Her hand, groping, touched smooth leather, and she was on her feet, drawing out a suitcase. John's, bought for camp last summer. She sank to the floor beside it, her knees weak, and pushed at the catch. John's suitcase, packed! Pajamas, shirts, sweater, little balls of socks, the case with brushes, the cup he'd won in the Junior tennis match. She closed the lid, snapped the lock, and pushed the case out of sight beneath the bed. Then she got to her feet, brushing out wrinkles in the blue linen. Whatever he'd planned, he must come home first. But where, this time of year— Had George said, done something? Once, when John was just a little fellow, he'd run away. But all boys do that— Hazel could see him, riding home with the milkman, dirty and tired, but proud because the man let him hold the reins. Was he in school, after all? If he'd packed the suitcase, he meant to take it. She wanted to run through the streets to the school, to be sure he was there, safe. But he'd never forgive her. She would have to wait. Perhaps it was some school trip, some legitimate plan she had not heard about. Oh, John!

She went quickly to the door of Lorna's room, her eyes

dark, her lip caught between her teeth. Rose and blue, ruffled and feminine orderliness, surely she would find no clue to disaster, no vague threat here. She looked at the small painted desk, her hand lifting, fingers curved, importunate. The drawers there might have notes from that boy. That was different, prying. Fair enough to look for clues, when she had such hunger. But no prying. She opened the closet door, and the dresses swayed on their hangers, neat blue pasteboard containers for shoes, for stockings, sat in decorous rows, and a whiff of sachet blew out. Hazel closed the door and went away. Her daughter's room kept secrets as well as did her daughter. But she's like George, thought Hazel. She has his passion for fitness, for orderliness. If she has it about her own life—

Lizzie served tea, toast, and an egg, with an air of that being more than one might expect, especially as she'd been trying to finish the ironing. She'd ordered the things for dinner before she knew Mis' Curtis was coming, and she hoped it would suit. Hazel wandered into the living room. She supposed she'd better keep the woman for a while, at least. "Although I might feel less an interloper in my own house if I had the dinner to get."

She tried to take a nap, but when she lay down the clatter of the Pullman trucks over the ties began again in her head. The minister's wife telephoned. Would Mrs. Curtis meet with the Ladies' Aid on Friday, and give a little talk about her trip to New York? They would charge ten cents admission for the tea and sandwiches. "I knew you were back," she added, "because I saw you with the grocer boy." (You would! thought Hazel.) Yes, she could come Friday, unless something came up to prevent.

"You aren't going to Hollywood right away, are you? I said I'd never believe Mrs. Curtis would leave her family to mingle with the kind of people we hear of out there,

even if we do try to be charitable, where there's so much smoke—"

"Who said I was going?"

"It was in the paper, how you were considering an offer."

Mr. Horn must have put it in! And George must have seen it! "I'm not going immediately," said Hazel. "Nothing's settled. I won't go before Friday, anyway." She could see the face of the woman, spare, dun, with a look of bitter exhaustion in the sagging folds about mouth and chin, like that of a swimmer spent from the effort to keep above the surface of gentility. Not since the depression had the church made up the full amount of the Reverend Mr. Morrison's small salary. She must almost hate Hazel for her sudden fortune! "I'll see you then," Hazel finished, "I'm sure I can make it."

That would account for George's tone on the telephone. He saw her alighting for a moment, en route to California. "We'll play it up," Horn had said. "That's the way to create a demand, make those fellows think someone else is hot on your track." She went uneasily upstairs, thinking that if she had alighted she had found a threat of quicksands where the earth had always been firm and stable. She'd change her dress. Not one of the new ones. The blue silk with the lace collar that George always liked. She dressed slowly, watching the hands of the small clock crawl. The children couldn't possibly come before four, and they might be later.

It was five when John came. Hazel sat in the living room, the evening paper unread on her lap, her cold hands folded over it. She heard a car stop, heard John's, "So long. Thanks for the lift." She went quickly into the hall, the secret and ignored dread of the long afternoon peeling away like a dry husk. He pushed open the door and looked

at her, silent, but she saw a great gulp move in his thin throat. "Hello," he said, "when'd you blow in?"

"Oh, this morning." She had to kiss him, had to run her fingers, feather-light, over his stiff young head, although she held tight to the passion of tenderness which cried in every nerve-end for release. "How are you, Johnny? Come tell me what you've been doing. Did you miss me?" She slipped a hand under his arm, pulled him into the living room, down on the divan beside her.

John let his strapped bundle of books plunk to the floor, and dangled his hands between his knees. "I noticed you weren't around," he drawled. "You don't seem much different."

"You haven't changed much yourself." Hazel laughed. She thought, that line his head makes, rising from his neck, that sweet boy line— But his color isn't good, too white.

"Say, did they really give you the money?"

"Yes, they really did. I brought you something. It's there on the table, the small box."

John looked at her, his mouth moving around words, and then, without speaking, he crossed to the table, his coat hitched up in funny wrinkles. He came back with the box, and opened it slowly. The flat gold rectangle lay in his palm, and he twitched at the leather strap. "Gee, it's a pip-pin! It's a good one, too. But you know—" his face twitched, "Dad'll probably say I oughtn't to have it."

"What nonsense, John! Father isn't like that." Hazel pushed back his cuff, and buckled the watch about his thin wrist. "There!"

"You don't know." John held out his hand, shook down the sleeve to see how much of watch remained on view, "You don't know—" and suddenly his face had despair, complete because without perspective, his parted lips dry,

his forehead creased. "He's fed up with me. He said so." He gulped. "He'll tell you about it, don't worry. First I meant to clear out, get the hell away. Only then you called up, and I didn't like to run out on you. An' I was talking with a fellow down by the freight yard, and he says times ain't what they used to be and you can't bum your way any more because if you haven't got a job then you have to go on relief or in a camp, and I couldn't because they'd look up my family. So I thought I'd wait and talk it over with you."

Hazel sat very still. He seemed balanced so precariously on a thin taut wire of confidence that a clumsy move from her would knock him headlong beyond her reach, into what pit of foolhardiness or danger? "Would you mind," she asked, "telling me what happened? I'm glad you waited. I should have felt let down if I'd come home—" She couldn't go on. That suitcase!

"The car got smashed." John hunched forward, knees pressing his hands together. "I was just driving along, and this fellow comes around the corner too fast and skids into me. It was sleety, see? Honest, I didn't do a thing wrong, but the fenders were crumpled and the running board stove up, and Dad said I oughtn't to be out loose."

"He'd be upset, John, but he didn't mean—"

"You didn't hear him!" John's fingers dug into his hair. "I can't help it if a mug skids into me! I can't help it if I haven't got a license yet. I just took the car to go down town, I wasn't going on any joy ride the way he said."

"You weren't hurt," said Hazel, softly.

"I wish I had been."

"Oh, hush! The car can be repaired, and your father was just worried—"

"He stays mad"—a glint of humor touched John's

mouth—"because he has to walk and that reminds him all the time."

"Anyone may have an accident." Hazel spoke briskly. "Now you unpack your suitcase and hang around with us a little longer. I sort of like having you here."

John straightened his shoulders, and rolled his eyes at her, round and surprised. "You knew—" he began, when outside another car stopped. "See here," he said, "when you go to Hollywood—"

"Sh!" said Hazel. "They're coming." And close to his ear she added, "You stick around, and if ever I should go, I'll take you along."

Then George and Lorna were in the hall, Lorna with little shrieks of welcome, George with a restrained and somewhat questioning heartiness.

Lorna loved her dress, white chiffon, soft and swirling. She held it up and posed before the hall mirror, and Hazel thought, she looks happier, less subdued, something has happened to her, too. "And this is for you." Hazel handed George the catalogue of dental supplies, open at the smooth cut of the marvelous dentists' unit, all black and shining chromium. "Only I couldn't bring it. It's coming soon, by express." George looked.

"You mean you ordered it for me?"

"Yes, sir." Hazel stood close to him, her finger on the page. "That very one! Don't you like it?"

"Yes, yes. It's just what I've needed."

"If it isn't exactly the one you want, we could send a wire—" Hazel pushed herself against that skim of reservation over his acceptance. "What isn't right, George? I wanted it to be perfect."

"It's quite right. This is one of the best supply houses. I am afraid you were pretty extravagant."

Hazel shook her head. She knew that almost uttered *but*,

that withholding of the kind of delight he should have. Better let it alone, rang a small warning. She couldn't, she had to dash on, no matter what! "You might as well tell me," she said. "It's really not a trifle, and we might still change it—"

"Trifle! Of course not. There's nothing to tell. I was just wishing you might have consulted me—"

(Dear Heavens, was his pride hurt again?) "But George, darling, you don't consult about presents!"

"You see, I practically gave an order for just such a unit this very noon. That shows I really want it!" He was defensive, prodded into explanation. "I meant to buy it on time of course. But it would have been nice if you could have placed the order here. I've taken a good deal of her time."

"At luncheon?" asked Hazel, and down the street like a picture on a banner unfurling in a gust of angry wind marched the figure of that saleswoman, that red-winged blackbird person, arrogant and smart. You had luncheon with her, you wouldn't come home, said Hazel's sealed, dark look. And why not, after all you've been up to, answered George's steady unrepentant gaze. This, thought Hazel, can't go on now, with the children listening. It must wait. Her stiff smile at George was a rain ticket. That was one thing about having children. You had to postpone settling difficulties, and sometimes after such postponement you couldn't find them again. Either they had evaporated, or you had mislaid them and they waited to trip you in some dark corner of your life.

"Dinner should be ready," she said. "I'm famished. Last night, on the train, I was too tired to eat, and Lizzie wouldn't give me much lunch. She, like the rest of you, hadn't expected me. Wash your faces, my lambs, and let's sit down."

With the soup, Hazel began an account of her trip to New York. As she talked, she listened, thinking, Mr. Horn should hear me! He'd give me a job as publicity liar right away. She had moved in a glitter, in a dazzle, rushing from triumph to triumph, meeting famous men and women, being toasted in cocktails, dined and wined and fêted, sought after by radio (they said my voice was excellent!), by motion pictures, pursued by rival publishers (well, Mr. Horn said she was!), Lorna leaned forward, elbows on table, chin propped on crossed hands, her blue eyes wide, her lips parted. John listened more soberly, frowning, glancing at his father. And George ate methodically, with an air of one who has often heard such recitals, but as Hazel mounted with animation from one glory to another, his color changed, until instead of his usual clear flush on cheek-bones, his face was pale except for a curious dull red along the line of jaw. She couldn't stop. She was saying, see, you never guessed how wonderful I am, you don't believe it now, this is the kind of life I could have, and you are indifferent, cruel, you take saleswomen in black suits and red feathers to lunch!

"Do they just have parties all the time? Honestly, Mother, I don't see how you can bear it to come back to Lounsberry!" Lorna sighed.

"They implored me to stay." Hazel was reckless. She'd decked that little brown wren of Mr. Horn's out with bird of paradise feathers until she almost believed the bird had worn them! "They said you had to be on the ground to catch the early worms. (Confound that bird.) I mean to meet the right people, work up radio programs, everything."

"You had to come home sometime," said John, "unless you stayed forever. Don't they know you've got folks? Parties all the time would be sickening, if you ask me."

"Oh, I'd love it!" said Lorna, and George did not look up from his plate.

After dinner Lorna wished to try on the new frock. Hazel watched George settle himself with the evening paper. "You don't have to go back to the office?" she asked, brightly, from the doorway.

"How can I, with no car? Or didn't John tell you about his latest piece of brilliance?"

John bolted up the stairs as if his father's words yapped at his heels.

"Oh, yes. Well, I'm glad something keeps you home. I mean you drive yourself just too hard."

George shifted his paper. "That was why you wrote your book, wasn't it? Those lonely evenings while the struggling dentist struggled."

Hazel drew a quick breath, and mounted the stairs, her feet clipping each step sharply. If he was going back to the very beginning, if those first silly interviews still rankled— For the first time, with a galvanic shock as if the thought had physical existence, Hazel said to herself, "Perhaps we are finished. I've destroyed his contentment, his notion of our marriage, of me, his sufficiency. He feels belittled." She paused at the top of the stairs, one hand clinging to the rail, and everything about her, the light, the walls, the sounds of the house receded. She was alone in a dark void, her blood had curdled in that keen pain under her heart, and no stimuli could touch her. She mustn't faint, that would be absurd. Somewhere she found her will, she stirred her curdled blood, she drew light and sound and the shape of walls and floor back into her consciousness.

"See, Mother, how do you fasten this?" Lorna was calling her, and Hazel went quickly into her room. She would finish with this, she would say good night to Lorna and to John, and then, and then! Eagerness beat up in her, as if

the very chemistry of her body had changed. She wanted to confront George, to have this out. She was through with sidewise fencing, with gentle subterfuge, with postponements.

She fastened the girdle, catching the sweet warmth of her daughter's round, soft body. Lorna pirouetted, the toes of her gold strapped dancing sandals shining. "It's adorable, Mother! Put on your new black dress and let's pretend it's a party. We could show Father."

"Not tonight." Hazel adjusted the puffed caps at the shoulders. "It is sweet, and it fits very well."

"It's only a paper moon, it's on-ly a painted sky—" sang Lorna, taking dance steps. "Did all the people have on lovely dresses at the parties? Didn't they think you looked simply swell in yours?"

Hazel sat down on the bed. Her exhibition mood had vanished, and she said, drily, "No one spoke of it." She sat there, her brow crinkling, while Lorna swept downstairs to show her father. Just what had happened to Lorna? Suddenly she had it, tangible as if it lay between her clasped fingers. Why, Lorna was actually thinking about her, Hazel! Little, first attempts— She had moved a step out of the childish prison of her self. Hazel watched the girl draw the soft clinging folds carefully over her head, watched her move about the room, thinking how sweet she is, that milk and honey white and gold, just that bra' and panties— "However do you keep warm enough?" she said.

"Oh, I couldn't breathe if I had to wear more clothes!" Lorna hung away the dress, tied the cord of a blue bathrobe firmly around her waist, and sat down beside Hazel. "You know—" she studied her pink toes, and then rushed on. "The girls think it's wonderful, to have a mother that can do what you do. They ask me everything about you. And Miss Chalmers, in English class, said we should be

very proud, and maybe I might inherit some of your ability. I don't think I'll get married for years and years." She sighed. "I'm not really very smart, yet, but maybe—if I worked—I could do something, and go to New York and get my picture taken and everything." She hugged her round knees and brooded.

It hasn't been a total loss, then, thought Hazel. She relaxed, quiescent, receptive, waiting. At long, long intervals, and always after the girl had come out at the end of some experience, some stiff ascent in her development, she had a moment when she wished to talk. Just a few phrases, a seal the child placed on something she was done with.

"It isn't always being in love, is it, when you go all soft and squidgy inside being kissed, even if you think it is? Anyway, some boys just work too fast. Only when he got another girl right off, just because I wouldn't— But it's all right now. I see my future much more clearly."

"That's good, darling," said Hazel, quietly. She must keep her horror out of her voice. That dreadful boy!

"Good night!" cried Lorna. "Look how late it is, and me with scads of homework." Confessional was over, she would have no more of it. She jumped to her feet, tugging at the cord about her waist. "I'll just say it was so exciting having you come home that I forgot about work!"

Hazel gave her a quick hug. "Good girl," she said, and Lorna pretended to be absorbed in the book she had opened. John's door was ajar, and Hazel laid one hand against her throat, as she saw what the boy was doing. The trophy cup sat on the dresser, and John was stowing away in a drawer the contents of his suitcase. She stepped past silently, and went down the stairs.

George stood at a window of the living room, hands hooked together behind his back. He did not hear her, and Hazel looked at him, gray suit snug over truculent square

shoulders, smooth light head well up, heels together. Her glance hurried about the familiar room, and all the furniture, the rugs, the lamps, chosen over so many years, lived with, looked back at her bleakly, meaning gone from them. George hadn't even turned on the radio! She walked in, selecting a strip of bare wood beyond the rug, and George said, not moving, "I thought you must have gone to bed."

"No," said Hazel. "I haven't."

"I thought you probably were pretty tired after all you've been doing."

"No, I'm not."

He turned then, reluctantly, as if he heard in her voice the restrained violence of her intention to get at him, as if he preferred more silence, more dodging, more sly undercuts.

"I just want to say this. I don't mean to stand in your way at all. You can go on to Hc'lywood or New York or wherever you want to. As Lorna said, Lounsberry isn't much to come back to. I can't compete with your offers. Lorna can go to college next fall. And John—a good stiff school somewhere would be good for him. He needs some sense pounded into him. We'll close the house. I'd rather live at the hotel. And later—"

Hazel sat down. "Yes," she prompted. "Later?"

"Later we could arrange for a divorce. A nice, quiet one, that wouldn't upset the children. You could stop off at Reno, say, on your way to Hollywood."

"You've got everything planned without even asking me—"

"Ask you? What was there to ask you? When you've shown in every move you've made what you really want! When all our life meant was that you were so bored you had to say so publicly! From the minute that telegram came about the prize you were different. You haven't known I

existed. You haven't thought or cared about anything except what was happening to you, what was being said about you." George spoke with a quiet, unmodulated fluency which meant that all these words, worn round and smooth from constant turning in his mind, rolled out with no effort. He could not know they were amazing, because to him they were rote-familiar. "I've always known you didn't really care about my work, you never listened when I tried to explain it, it was only the way I made a living for us, and now that you can make so much more money you don't have to pretend. I waited till you'd been to New York. I don't know quite what I hoped for. But now I see it's no use. All these grand things—I won't stand in your way. You wouldn't say this to me, because you'd think, mistakenly, 'Poor George! I mustn't hurt him.' But I believe in extracting dead teeth. I can't stand things as they are. It's upsetting my work." His blue eyes had a sudden wintry gleam. "Do you know what I did yesterday? I mixed up two sets of X-rays, and I pulled out the wrong tooth. That is, it was the right tooth in the wrong mouth. The plate showed a shadow, but it wasn't Mrs. MacAndrew's shadow." He broke off with an impatient gesture, his hand implying, but you don't care about that!

Hazel sat back in her chair, her hands limp, her heart beating so heavily she felt it in her wrists. Dear Lord, it was like reading another terrible interview, or review of her book, this trying to see what George saw of her! The self she thought she was had shrunk into a dried pea, rattling in shells provided by other people! She didn't care about dentistry. George had told her that before. But who else could, the way George did? Was it true, that she was selfish, indifferent, absorbed? That grand picture she'd built up, of herself in New York! She'd come rushing

home, and now George was pitching her out, making her over into a hard, demanding creature— Perhaps—

"George Curtis," she said, fiercely, "are you getting rid of me for another woman? Are you—that woman you took to lunch? That saleswoman? Are you in love with her?"

"No," said George. "Not yet. We have things in common."

"Oh!" cried Hazel. She flung out her arms, her eyes brilliant under the heavy lashes. "George, you idiot! I won't be extracted. I'm not a dead tooth! You"—was it laughter that sprang from the tight coil of feeling?—"you've mixed your X-ray pictures all up. Oh, don't you know I've thought about you every second? I've been so wretched because you didn't like it— I've been terrified! I had to make you think I had a grand time, didn't I? I didn't even feel real until I got home—and then you wouldn't come— Oh, I won't let you be so stupid that you don't know what I want first!"

"You mean you'd give up your Hollywoods and everything?"

"I didn't mean that. We could leave that till it came up. But I mean if we tried, I'd get used to being somebody, not a big somebody, and you'd get used to it, and it wouldn't make any more difference than—than your filling a tooth!"

"You don't think I mind that all this happened to you?"

Hazel looked up at his strained face, the light gleaming on his forehead, on his neatly brushed fair hair.

"I had a feeling you were a different woman, not the girl I married. But I—"

Hazel slid to her feet, clasped her hands behind his head, and kissed him. "There!" she murmured, against his lips. "Same girl."

Later they sat together on the divan, hands linked,

Hazel's head on his shoulder. She thought: he did mind, terribly, just what we neither of us ever will know. But I've got him back. Dear Lord, help me look interested in dentistry or machinery or anything else he wants to talk about! I do love him so much.


George said, clearing his throat, "I bought a copy of your book. Two-fifty. They had quite a pile of them in Hudson's."

Hazel held her breath. She wanted to sit away from him, to watch his face, but she kept her head down against the solid shoulder.

"It's a good story. I don't see how you thought it all up. It wasn't exactly like your father's folks, although I recognized some of it. I was glad you ended it that way."

Hazel relaxed again. "I tell you," she said, dreamily, "when I write the next one, you can read it as I go along. You could make suggestions."

EXPERIMENT



Experiment

I

*S*PRING CAME early this year in the Middle West, too early, in a week of warm sun in March, when sap rushed up, and almost overnight the clear outline of branches against the sky softened and blurred into tree flowers, maple, elm, and the delicate wash of green on willows. Fruit blossoms in the valley swelled almost into color; forsythia gathered sunlight along its stems. Like a precocious child, amazing the observers with tricks of maturity. Then, the last week of March, a bitter wind blew under heavy skies, snow fell incongruously over the blossomy trees, the owners of peach orchards burned smudges hopelessly, and the forsythia seemed to draw its yellow tips back into tight brown sheaths. Was spring ruined? Or was spring, like a few of the precocious children, as tough as hope itself? The bitter wind blew itself out, a wave of warmth rolled up from the south, and men working in fields and gardens discarded their mackinaws and tied handkerchiefs about their foreheads to keep sweat from their eyes.

The program committee for the cornerstone laying at the college decided not to postpone the ceremonies after all. And that was well, because the guest of honor, young John Henderson, could not be expected to wait indefinitely, even in his home town, for weather to moderate. Nor could you move the cornerstone into the auditorium, especially after the expense of constructing a platform for the speakers,

and seats for the distinguished spectators, and the difficulty of arranging for the broadcast—practically a nation-wide hookup. The President of the college had been surprised at the amount of interest shown about this appearance of John Henderson. They had had a time persuading him to come. His modesty, or shyness, or whatever it was, had become part of his legend; he had even refused to go abroad to receive the Prix Internationale for Physics. The President reflected suspiciously that no doubt this was a pose, a clever one, too. But if he should try it for himself, what would happen would be that some other fellow would receive the small honors which he had to struggle to win. He knew.

It had been the President's own idea, asking Henderson to officiate at the ceremony which was to dedicate the new Science Building. Since Henderson's gift, practically all his prize money, with the stipulation that the rest of the funds for a building be raised within two years, had served as an effective prod to alumni and other donors, even Henderson could see the appropriateness of his appearance. What if he never made speeches? He could slap on a trowelful of plaster, and it would be fine publicity for the college, going on the air. The President felt phrases from his own careful speech move in his throat. His voice went pretty well on the radio, the few times he had spoken. As good as Roosevelt's, more than one friend had told him. When Baxter, the retiring Physics head, cast around bold hints that he should have the introducing of Henderson, the President put it up to him frankly, did he think his pip-squeak (not that he called it that!) would broadcast well? Baxter hadn't even been a member of the staff in the days when John Henderson was a student at the college. Funny thing, President Hollister would never have picked Henderson as the boy most likely to turn into a celebrated alumnus. Nondescript little fellow, took no part in ath-

letics, showed no real college spirit. He'd had a good record, of course, but he was scarcely what you would call an all round fellow, the kind the college liked to turn out. President Hollister had seen him occasionally at the house, one of the string of young men Adelaide trailed behind her. Not one she had ever taken seriously, to be sure. (He wished she would settle down!) Hollister hadn't, at the time, realized how young the boy was. And the college had no rating with honor societies then. People might think that Henderson's fame had helped pull up his Alma Mater; but wasn't it, really, the work Hollister had done? The boy had been shrewd to pick physics for his field. You could call it almost a fad, the attention given to that science. Now when Hollister was in college, languages and the fine arts were at the top. Perhaps if he'd gone into science—

The President went over the seating plan with the other members of the Program Committee. Several men from the University were coming, two from the East, the college faculty, and members of Henderson's family. Henderson's mother had furnished that list, quite a bevy of relatives; they'd all have to have good seats, although not one of them would rate a front place anywhere except through this connection with John Henderson. Funny thing, genius (for you had to admit Henderson had genius!) springing up like that in a family that never made headlines before, unless you counted an occasional scandal. Not on the Henderson side, no one had ever heard of any of them. But the Davies family, John Henderson's mother's line, seemed to have some notorious members. The first Davies in town had been all right, a minister, but his sons had drifted away, amounting to nothing. There'd been a lot unearthed since John leaped into fame. Hollister went over the list. Paul Davies, that was the grandfather; he'd gotten mixed up with a girl

when he was past sixty, and his wife had divorced him. A pretty thing, for a man and woman who've lived together more than forty years! John's own father and mother were decent citizens; his father, Nelson Henderson, was superintendent of the wire fence factory; his mother was prominent in church work. Some of the other names were unfamiliar, Gardner, Wagner, must be side branches.

Hollister had heard there was considerable feeling when John turned his prize money over to the college. Relatives always can use your money! Well, they could all sit down front and see their distinguished son, grandson, cousin, whatever he was to them, dedicate the building he had made possible. Something queer, when you came to think of it, a young man giving away thousands of dollars, as if he had no use for it. What did he live on? You don't make much, working in a laboratory. Perhaps he figured on the publicity—Hollister dismissed his speculations, and offered advice about the music for the program: "Pomp and Circumstance" for the opening march. The college song. Then something lighter, semi-classical, perhaps.

Hollister had suggested a dinner for Henderson, but his mother had in a way explained the refusal. "He hasn't been home for almost ten years, Dr. Hollister, and he's staying just the one night. We thought a little family supper. You know how it is when your boy comes home!" Well, it didn't matter, except that it would have looked well in the newspapers, probably would have been reprinted in the city items, too. Dr. Hollister and Mrs. Hollister entertained at dinner for Dr. John Henderson. Among the other distinguished guests were—Adelaide had made the suggestion, as a matter of fact. Now that she was past the age where she could run around with the college boys, she had only the few unmarried instructors to fall back upon, and even Hollister had to admit they weren't exciting matri-

monial prospects. The depression had made it harder than ever for a girl like Adelaide—ambitious, really quite beautiful, if she was his daughter!—to find a proper husband. If John Henderson hadn't married, was it because he'd been— But this was one of his paternal day-dreams, he would at least see to it that Adelaide had a chance to meet Henderson. She'd be in a front seat, too.

Hollister walked across the campus, hat under his arm, the spring sun as benign as the smile he offered the students who passed him. He could see the excavation for the new physics building at the corner beyond the library, the brick masonry of the foundation neat and bright under the sun, the yellow pine barricades, built to shield the old arbor vitae trees from blasting, looking like a new, grotesque note in landscape gardening. The platform was finished, and workmen lounged against piles of lumber, eating sandwiches from lunch boxes, before they built the seats. Real spring in the air, now, even the smoke from that fire of chips one of the men had built had a pleasant piney tang; Hollister's step was sprightly, everything was well arranged, he really had executive ability, two days now, and the ceremony of dedicating Henderson Hall would really put the college on the map.

II

Margaret Henderson, John's mother, had worried about the weather. She wanted everything perfect for John's day of triumph in his home town.

"Suppose we have another sleet and snow storm! After all these preparations!"

"The thermometer's rising steadily, the barometer's good." Nelson, John's father, had just come in from the porch, where he had been reading the instruments. "Don't

cross bridges till you come to them!" For thirty years he had been saying that to her, in effect, in his quiet, comforting voice. "You're tired, you've been working too hard, getting ready for the crowd." He sat down in his easy chair, his heavy body filling it with a creak of springs, and reached for the evening paper.

"You don't even see them when you reach them!" Margaret wanted to take the paper out of his hands, she wanted him to talk! "You just jump across!"

He looked up at her, his eyes very blue behind his spectacles, the lines of his square, sandy face humorous. "Gets me across," he said.

Margaret frowned, fine, dark brows flying together. It was true. And her imagination fashioned torrents of future catastrophe, across which it threw a cobweb, a swaying rope on which she tried to make a nightmare transit.

"What else is worrying you?" he asked. "Not just the weather?" He peered into the hall, and lowered his voice. "Mother hasn't been cantankerous?"

"No, not a bit." Margaret relaxed in her chair, her long hands, the knuckles slightly reddened, folded. Nelson was listening to her, now. "She hasn't even said a word about the prize money, this time. It's just—I don't know how they'll get on, so many of them coming together, after all this time. I don't want anything to happen—John's one day at home."

"Oh, they'll be on their good behavior." Nelson stretched a little. "Kinda funny, though, your mother coming, when she knew your father would be here."

"She didn't know it. When she wrote, Father was down there in Ohio. I didn't know he'd be back so soon. Then I didn't tell her. She'd come all the way from California, just to see John. It seemed a shame—But now I'm scared!"

Nelson gave a little whistle, *whhee-oo*. "They haven't

seen each other since your father ran away with his lady, have they?" Margaret shook her head. "I tell you, think how pleased your mother's going to be when she hears his new wife's left him! He hung on to her longer than I thought he would, at that. Why, it's almost ten years, isn't it?"

"He's grown old so fast this last year—as if he'd tried to stay young for Ethel, and then when she left him—" (He had dropped in for a few minutes that afternoon, to see if he could do something about the celebration. President Hollister was a pig-headed jackass, refusing suggestions from John's own grandfather. He had blustered, puffing out his sagging cheeks, he had talked in a loud tone, to conceal his increasing deafness; but when Mrs. Flora Henderson, Nelson's mother, had trotted into the room and seated herself, her knitting perched conveniently on the wide shelf of her bosom, Father had stayed only a moment, diminished into a nervous fidgeting under Mrs. Henderson's sardonic and realistic scrutiny. "I'll see Hollister," he had said, truculently, at the door. "I want to make sure there are the proper references to the Davies family in his introductory speech." Then he had rushed off briskly, head forward, charging a hostile world. Mrs. Henderson had sniffed and twirled her knitting, meaning, of course, that the less said anywhere about the Davies family, the better!) "Oh, Nelson, I *am* worried! Suppose they start—"

"They're just a couple of old people, honey! They can't have much left to fight about. They'll be thinking about their famous grandson, maybe, instead of themselves."

Margaret looked at him, his steady glance enfolded her; she thought, Nelson won't let anything happen. She had lived over too much of the past today, thinking about the people who would come to the house tomorrow. She didn't

often look backward, Nelson had taught her the folly of that, his kindly sanity was a light which left no shadowy corners. But something, either this gathering of the clan, what there was left of it, or the amazing fact of John's achievement, had driven her out of her security, almost out of the present, so that all day she had been two persons, one a busy woman preparing for a great occasion, the other a girl driven steadily backward by little leaping flames of recollection, emotion she had thought she had long since stamped to blackness beneath her feet.

"One thing I know they'll all think, all these relations of yours," Nelson went on, "and that is that the new building ought to be named Davies and not Henderson." He chuckled. "It's kind of a joke on them, after the fuss they made when we got married."

Margaret glanced at him, her eyes widening in half surprise. But Nelson couldn't have heard her thoughts; he couldn't know how she had moved restlessly all day between the present and the past. Her mother, years ago, "Throwing yourself away on that clod! With all your promise!" And Margaret had known him, almost from the moment she met him, as a fortress within which she would dwell, safe from the devastating storms that had swept across her childhood. But like a fortress, impervious—to storms, to more subtle winds. Had she kept—so secretly that never until today had she guessed at the slightest hint of its presence, and today she had seen it only as a shadow across grass, gone before she could look fully—a trace of condescension, an overtone to love that in bestowing it she granted a favor? Nelson was watching her now. "But he is John Henderson," she said. Your son, she meant. But oh, more mine!

"Yes. By God, he is my son, he is a Henderson, and he's done more than any Davies ever did! Even"—the humorous

lines about his eyes and mouth deepened—"even if it is the Davies in him. He got his brains from you, all right. Funny, how I used to think he'd never amount to much, skinny little runt, nose in a book. But you stood up for him. I guess you were right, Margaret. If I'd put him in the factory—" He ran fingers through his crest of thick, ash-sandy hair. "It's hard, in a way, when your boy isn't like other kids. I don't know what to make of him yet. Now Florence is just a nice, wholesome girl, a daughter any man'd like. Too bad she can't come tomorrow. I'd like a few more of my own folks around."

"She can't very well come, with the baby due any day now." Florence was her father's girl, plump, fair, even-tempered.

"I hope this one will be a boy. Time I had a grandson. Now, why doesn't John get married? Look at him, throwing away his money, nothing but work, why doesn't he start a home of his own?"

"You won't say anything to him about the money, Nelson?" (John had written to her, I cannot keep it for myself, it is a gift for science and not for me, it must be used to allow other men to work. If there had been a properly equipped department in our college, I should have had fewer blunders, fewer wasted hours. A small place, with no burden of tradition, where boys may come—) "It was a fine thing for him to do!"

"I could have stood a little endowment for wire fences, myself," said Nelson, wryly. "Don't worry, Mother. I won't say a word. He earned it, it was his. But that's what I mean about him, he never acts like other folks."

"He's not like other folks!"

"Well, he's human, isn't he?" Nelson ran a finger along the edge of his collar. "Henderson Hall. You know—" He grinned at her, confessing. "I walked around there to-

night, on the way home from the factory. It's going to be a grand building. I thought how Henderson would be cut in stone over the door, and folks would see it—young folks, walking up the steps to learn things—and something sort of swelled up in me, here—" He pounded his chest with a fist, the gold symbols on his watch chain danced.

"Oh, Nelson, of course you're proud of him!" Margaret's fine mouth trembled, her lashes shone wet again.

"Hey, I didn't mean to start anything. Only—most of us wait for a tombstone, don't we? What time's he getting here tomorrow?"

"I told you, he gets in at one. I said we'd meet him, but Dr. Hollister had it all arranged, a welcome committee. They take him straight to the campus, the program begins at two."

"You'd think his own father and mother could meet him at the train! Hollister's acting as if he'd invented John."

"At least I refused the dinner invitation. Dr. Hollister was put out, too, but I said we had planned a family supper. You know, Nelson, I think that daughter probably thought of the dinner. She entertains for her father since Mrs. Hollister died. Don't you remember, John took her to a party, once? When he was a senior?"

"You mean she's after John?" Nelson stared.

"Oh, not that!" Margaret laughed. "I just meant she wanted a celebrity." She rested her chin on the palm of a hand, her eyes brooding. "It was before you bought your dress suit, don't you remember? The Senior Prom. John rented one, and it was yards too big around, he had to get it long in the legs—" (She could see him, the coat rippling between his shoulders; she had held it back in a fold when he looked in the mirror, his face white, purple smudges, thumbmarks, under his eyes, the way they always came when he was excited or exhausted. It looks like a scarecrow,

he had said, but I've got to go. Before he went, they had wound up the old victrola—that was before they had a radio—and he had practiced dancing steps with her, his face so solemn and white that her throat ached. And he never had said one word about the party. Nor about Adelaide Hollister.)

"That Hollister girl needn't think she can catch John now, he's been around too much." Nelson clapped his hand over a yawn, and lifted his newspaper tentatively. He hadn't had a chance to look at it yet. But Margaret's silence was not quite the comfortable intimacy in which it was all right to read, and he laid the sheets back on the table. "You got everything ready for the supper?" he said.

"I think so. I'll finish mixing the salads tomorrow."

"Did Mother help?"

"Oh, yes. She was a great help." (It was like a present to Nelson, when she commended his mother. Always, the first few days of her annual visit, he was—not exactly nervous, Nelson never was that—but concerned, as a little boy might be, hoping that this time she and Margaret would get along swimmingly, that each of them would see in the other what he saw in each. Margaret didn't say that his mother had shown her, for the thirtieth time, how she should wipe out the inside of each eggshell instead of wasting precious drops of albumin, nor how she had produced from her bulging suitcase a jar of drippings to use in the devil's food she wanted to make, because she knew Margaret wasted butter.) "She's so pleased that Gertrude and her husband are driving over in the morning. Will thought he couldn't come the day your mother left, but his prize mare foaled yesterday, so it's all right. She said she didn't want to be the only one on the Henderson side."

"She still thinks John must have been crazy to give away the money, but all the same she's proud of him. She's

been cutting things out of the papers, every bit she can find about the prize and the building."

"I hope—" Margaret stopped. She had almost said she hoped that Will Wagner wouldn't start on some of his stories—that pet one, for example, about the overamorous mare. She could imagine her own mother's horror! But Nelson was ever so little on the defensive about his sister's husband.

"You hope what?" He was, actually, braced against some attack.

"Oh, just that everything goes off perfectly. Mrs. Kupfer's coming in to help serve, and wash the dishes."

"It's been too much work for you." Nelson had heard her sigh. "If I get out of the red this year, you can have a steady girl in the kitchen again. I don't like you working."

"It's little enough to do, just the two of us most of the time, with the struggle you've been having!"

"Mother can help, while she's here. She's not happy unless she's scrubbing or cooking. But I never meant you to work."

"Darling, it doesn't hurt me! Even your mother says I've improved." Margaret laughed. "I didn't tell her I had Mrs. Kupfer in for two days housecleaning before she came!"

"All the same"—Nelson leaned back in his chair; one thumb polished the Masonic emblem on his watch chain—"it wasn't the way I planned it." He hesitated, and the ruddiness of his face deepened. "Damn it, I've been trying to figure things out. I don't know why John's coming home, this way, should set me thinking, but it does. Trying to figure out how a son of mine—of ours—got to be—well, you know, the paper said an internationally famous man. Isn't that a mouthful?"

Margaret felt her pulses quicken into a fine humming, Nelson had been less calm, then, than she had thought. He doesn't realize how marvelous it is, she had told herself, it's too far outside his factory yard, his home.

"Set me sort of taking an inventory. Stock-taking. When we got married, I hadn't any doubt it was what you ought to do. There wouldn't have been John, if you hadn't married me. But I was thinking—" his face had altered, under the light from the reading lamp; the structure of the skull became apparent under the solid flesh, the hard dome of forehead, the square chin, the firm jaw-hinges, the cheek-bones, well foreward, well below the eyes—"If you hadn't married—me—say—who knows what you might have done? You might have got to be the famous one, yourself. If you'd gone on to college, say. Or music, maybe. That time they had the concert here, and the piano player got his hand caught in the hack door, and you played accompaniments for the singer, you remember? He said you ought to go East to study, he'd give you a letter. And I joshed you out of it."

Margaret did not move, except to lay her hands together, the roughened tips of the long fingers sliding against the palms. Nelson was fanning the flames of recollection against which she had fought all day, instead of rescuing her he was driving her back into the burning forest. Never had he talked like this before.

"I never even thought about it, then." He ground his knuckles against his jaw, his eyes were puzzled. "You don't think about folks you know being famous, if you grow up on a farm, and have to work like hell to get a toe hold. Famous—why, that meant history books, dead men. All I thought was how much I wanted you. I wanted to take care of you. I meant to make a tidy little fortune for

you. I haven't done even that. And you—why, you might have been almost anything!"

She had thought so, in dull hours, herself, she had hinted it to Nelson; was this retribution, this anxiety in Nelson's face, this shaking of his acceptance of their life?

"It's upsetting, Margaret, getting ideas like this, when it's too late to do anything about it."

Margaret could hear her mother, in a voice that ran thin and hysterical through the dark house at night, destroying sleep, destroying peace, prying under the fingers which the girl Margaret pressed over her ears. "All I gave up to marry you! I might have been a great actress! Everyone said so! Look at me now!" Then the rumble of her father's voice, pacifying, until he lost his temper, and with a great bellow rushed out of the house. And the guilt which tightened in the girl's throat, choking her; it was the children who tied her mother down, without them—What was Nelson doing, turning her back into that unhappiness?

"What would you have done"—Margaret paused, what if Nelson hadn't swung her clear of all that tension, held her safe from all that buffeting?—"if you had thought of it, then?"

Nelson looked a moment, and suddenly, flinging back his head, he laughed. "Just what I did! What's got into me tonight? I wouldn't have stopped for wild horses. The minute I saw you—there's the girl for me, I said."

"As long as you still think so!" Margaret smiled at him. His laugh had routed the ghost of that troubled young girl, had sent back into the past the fire of recollection, so that the flames now were only in a mirror, without power to harm her. "I wouldn't have done much, anyway. I didn't care enough about it. Look at John, that's all he's cared about, his work. Lots of the Davies are smart enough, there's my brother, Tom. But they don't feel the way

John always has." She stopped, thinking of Tom; she saw Nelson withholding comment on the difference between his son and a Davies man. "Tom's coming tomorrow," she said. "I thought it might do him some good." She could see Nelson still withholding comment, and tenderness for him, like the soft, small feathers of a bird's breast, enclosed her.

"Who else is coming?" he asked. "Besides your father and mother."

"Your mother, and Gertrude and Will. And Mother's sister, Aunt Eliza. If she feels up to the trip. And Father's sister. I don't know why she's coming, she's never liked our family much. I suppose she doesn't have much to do, now her husband's dead. I was trying to plan how to seat them at supper, and I don't know which to put next to which. I'll put you between Father and Mother!"

"There ought to be some young folks, for John."

"But there aren't any. I never thought of it before. Except for Gertrude's children, and they're too young. Isn't it queer, Nelson, after all those big families? Almost as if the line was running out." For a moment her own words gave her a distinct visual image, an enormous hour-glass, in which the sands were people, lost and forgotten, her mother's people, her father's people, and one by one they plunged through the narrow twisted glass and fell, until scarcely a grain was left.

"Well," said Nelson, comfortably. "John's worth quite a lot of folks." He stood up, stretching. "Guess I'll go to bed. I want to run out to the factory first thing in the morning, make sure everything's all right for the day. Nowadays you never know what may be brewing overnight." He smoothed his coat down, out of the creases into which it had settled, and yawned. "You coming?"

"Yes." Margaret rose, with her light, quick movement,

and turned off the reading lamp. "Let's look out a minute, to see if the sky is clear."

She tucked her hand under his firm solid arm, they stood together on the small porch, there were a few stars behind the blur of maple boughs, perhaps a land mist had risen, concealing all but the large stars.

"John must be on the train now," she said. "I think it's going to be a good day."

"Sure it is." Nelson reached for her hand, drew it farther into the crook of his arm. Margaret relaxed, leaning against him. Just the way he stood there, firmly balanced, quiet, his face lifted a little—like a tree—that was Nelson. "Not a thing to worry about."

They climbed the stairs together, and Nelson's mother, Flora Henderson, opened her door a crack, and thrust out her head, the grayish hair done on two rows of curlers above the round, creased face. "I thought you two meant to sit up all night," she said. "I should think you'd want some sleep."

"We do. That's just what we've come upstairs for." Nelson tweaked at a curler. "Getting all dolled up? You got to look grand tomorrow, sitting right down front."

"I put my hair up every night," said Mrs. Henderson. "I'll tell you right now that for one I'm not going to make any fuss over John. It's enough to ruin a boy, all this attention at his age." The criss-cross wrinkles on her weathered cheeks deepened. "Why can't he just get married and settle down and keep out of the papers? Look at him, giving away his money. Whoever heard of a Henderson doing anything like that? I don't like it."

Nelson patted her shoulder, plump under the gray flannel bathrobe. "Take it easy, Ma," he said. "We have to get used to having a celebrity."

Mrs. Henderson sniffed. "He was a nice, ordinary little boy, too."

Margaret pulled her hand free from Nelson's arm, and went down the hall, saying, "Good night, Mother Henderson." She said it carefully, hiding her impatience. She knew what Mrs. Henderson would like for a grandson, someone made of earth like Gertrude's husband. John was different. A nice, ordinary little boy, indeed! He had hidden within that shy, unobtrusive, somewhat awkward exterior, he had gone secretly about his own business almost from the moment he was born. Would he have changed much, she wondered, and tried to think how he would look, tomorrow. She could catch little glimpses of his face, the domed forehead, the wide-spaced eyes, deepset, dark, lashes making their bright blue irises always a surprise, something noble and incongruous in the reflective upper face, the sensitive, mobile mouth and finely modeled chin. She unfastened the belt of her wool frock, slid the dress over her head. As she shook it free, Nelson came in, shutting the door quietly.

"You didn't mind Mother's saying that, did you?" he asked, peering at her.

"No. Only John never was ordinary!"

"She was just remembering how he used to visit her, on the farm, and she could do things for him. You know, make cookies, or show him the lambs. I think she was feeling lonely." Nelson sat on the edge of the bed, untying a shoestring. It knotted, and he bent, prying at it with his blunt forefinger. "I know how she feels." He glanced up, his face flushed from stooping, his eyes deprecating. "There's nothing any of us can do for John. He's apart from us. Why, look at those books he writes! I can't even read them, I don't know what they're about."

"Nelson, you don't mean you'd rather have some commonplace, dull kind of son?"

"I don't know what I mean." Nelson had his shoes off, he stood up, drawing his arms out of his coat sleeves, his chest swelled under the blue shirt in a great sigh. "You remember how he used to tag me around, when he was a little shaver?" He looked down at his hand, closing it slowly. "Fist about as big as a minnow, in my hand. He thought I was pretty fine. Now we've changed places. It takes some getting used to, that's all." He unfastened the watch chain, and padded slowly to the dressing table, to lay the thin gold watch in its place. "I know why that fellow in the Bible had a banquet for his prodigal son." He looked around at Margaret, his smile said, I know I'm a fool, it's a relief to tell you. "It made him feel good, that's why. Look at your father, the way he stands back of your brother Tom, paying his debts, getting him out of scrapes, trying to find him another job! Here I've always felt sorry for him, but by God, he's got his compensations!"

"And look at Tom," said Margaret. "Ruined." Her voice trembled, she had never before admitted this to Nelson. "I'll bet the prodigal son started right off again with his pocket full of his father's gold! And then what?"

Nelson rumbled his hair, his sandy brows lifted, creasing his forehead. "I suppose so," he said. "I don't mean I wish John was like that. I'm talking foolishness. But I feel better, now I said it. It's vanity, I suppose. But being a father's a damned funny thing. Not much more than an accident."

"Well, being a mother's funny, too. And being a wife. Being anything!" Margaret thought it was strange that John's home-coming had set Nelson into this—what had he called it?—stock-taking. Nelson, who moved so sturdily, so untroubled by reflection, through the days. "It's not just

accident that you let John go, free to be what he chose. That was doing a big thing for him."

"I can't even take the credit for that. You bullied me till I let the boy alone." Nelson grinned at her, ruefully, his fingers fumbling at the buttons of his vest. "The trouble is, Margie, I see I don't amount to much. Most of the time I feel as if I'd done pretty well, starting from scratch, hanging on through all the hard times. As well as most folks I know here in town. But today I got to thinking—I stand up all right, sized against other little men. I'm past fifty. I'm never going to do any more. My Lord, what ails me? I ought to be all pepped up about John, and instead—" He turned away, hanging his vest methodically over the back of a chair, something mournful in the flattened folds of blue shirt over his wide back. "The worst of it is I can't kid myself that I might have done any better."

"Oh, Nelson, darling!" Margaret was laughing, tears bright in her lashes. "You don't want a prize, you know you don't! It's just all this excitement about John's coming, it's upset both of us. I wouldn't have you different, not a grain. Dear Nelson, dear salt of all the earth!"

He peered around at her, suspicious of her laughter, he saw her tears. Thumbs caught in his belt, stretching it away from his body, he shook his head, his eyes candid and humble. Margaret made a quick motion toward him, she slid her arms inside his, tight about him, she strained against him. "Salt of the earth, rock of ages, that's you! John's proud of you, don't you think he isn't! We all are!" Nelson drew a long sigh against her breast, he rubbed his cheek against hers, a gruff, faintly scratchy caress.

"There," he said. "I won't be a damned fool." He padded across toward the bathroom door. "I'll take some bicarb, I guess. Maybe my stomach's upset."

When they were in bed, and the light was out, Nelson

reached across the space between the beds and found Margaret's hand. "Good girl," he said, and clung to her hand for a moment. "It'll be a big day tomorrow."

Margaret tucked her hand, warm from his, under her cheek, and after he slept she lay listening to his quiet breathing, watching the pattern on the ceiling thrown up by a street light on the corner, shining through the tufted branches of the maple. The pattern moved gently, as if the night wind blew across the ceiling, a slow shifting of lines and blossom blurs. Her mind wove back over the words Nelson had spoken, it shifted that pattern gently, giving her other phrases, wiser, more brilliant, more sustaining than any she had spoken. She thought, it isn't vanity in Nelson, nor jealousy. It's a loneliness, a loss. He mustn't be too humble, he is a good man. She felt, suddenly, a quickening of the rhythm of her body, as if her thoughts swept her with a rush of wings into a space of light, of clarity, where the light quivered like that above a hilltop in brilliant noon. A woman has a warning, if she will take it, about what is going to happen. A warning no man can have. When she bears a child, she knows the end has begun. Birth itself, every labor pain, is a struggle for separation. When John was born, when he was out of my body, I thought, he is no longer mine. In a way he was never mine, he just used me to be born! She had cried about it. But she had tried never to forget. He would go away, step by step, receding from her, into his own identity, his own life. A man had to learn this in a different way, not in the very tissues of his body. That was what Nelson meant, being a father was an accident. He, too, had been made use of!

She lifted herself on an elbow, straining to hear the slow breathing in the darkness. It was scarcely perceptible, the fire of Nelson's living was banked under such layers of sleep that it needed little oxygen. What would her life

have been like, without Nelson? She had said, I wouldn't have done much, I didn't care enough. No Davies ever does much, she might have added. There is a blight upon them. They feel too early the futility of effort. Nelson, tonight, had felt just a touch of that blight. But he would forget it. It's a kind of death, she thought, destructive, resentful. They destroy themselves, they destroy the people whom they love. And Nelson—she found the quality of his personality in terms of all her senses, the texture of his flesh, firm, warm, the tones of his voice, deep with humorous inflections, the quiet candor of his eyes. When Margaret had first known him, she had thought, he is like a child, simple, healthy, occupied with the present moment. There are things he can't understand, she had thought. But tonight she wondered; was that adjustment of his more than the contentment of ignorance? He was at ease in life, as Adam may have been before the angel with the flaming sword led him out of the garden. Perhaps Nelson's kind of serene unfretting assurance had its roots in physical balance, was the outward sign of vitality.

Margaret lay down again, turning toward Nelson, the pillow cool under her cheek. The Davies men had vitality, too, but not like Nelson's. They were extraordinarily alike, her father, her brother, what she had heard of her grandfather, her father's brothers. Vitality that was all nerves, that split into warring elements, so that they were at odds with themselves and with everyone else. Brilliance that guttered out early. But if, comparing Nelson with them, she had thought, he plods, he is different clay, surely Nelson had never felt anything lacking. Had she accepted his pride in her too readily, and given him back too little pride for his humility? I must go to sleep, she thought, it will be morning soon, and John will come. Then, drowsily, John is a Davies, that brilliant mind— Something momen-

tous, significant, toward which all her thoughts led, pushed against the barrier of sleep, almost she had it, could feel its shape, but it passed the barrier only as a dream she would not remember when she woke.

III

The next morning Margaret heard Mrs. Henderson's hard-heeled, determined tread down the stairs, out into the kitchen, almost an hour before seven, the usual rising time. Mrs. Henderson found a certain virtue in getting about while the household still slept, she might even ask, when Margaret appeared, "Do you feel well this morning?" as if only illness were an excuse for such laziness. It's her only way of feeling important, thought Margaret, opening her eyes. I must just smile at her, the way Nelson does. Time to get up, anyway. She didn't know just when her own mother and Aunt Eliza would come, they were driving over. She stood a moment at the window, the sun had risen, but the morning was hazy, so that the light across the grass was pearl-gray, not the color of sunlight, and all the shadows, the long shadows of tree trunks and thin shrubs, were soft and indistinct. The air, cool and full of the subtle aroma of growth, touched her bare arms and throat.

"What kind of day is it?" asked Nelson, as he woke, swinging his body up, his legs to the floor, not a drop of sleep clinging to him.

"I think it's a good one." Margaret sent him a quick little glance of investigation. He had slept away his brief doubt of himself, he drew a long breath of the spring air, and said:

"It's going to be warmer, I better set that thermostat low, with a houseful of folks. How you feeling this morning?"

"Excited," said Margaret. "I'll hurry in the bathroom, so you'll have plenty of time." As she bathed she heard Nelson padding about the room, opening bureau drawers, rattling hangers in the closet.

"Hey, Margie," he called at the door. "Which looks better with the gray suit, a white shirt or a striped one?"

"White," she called back, toweling herself briskly. She was glad she hadn't thickened up, the way some women did. She didn't feel almost fifty. Her face looked a little worn, that fine skin took the etching of illness or anxiety or just time itself too readily. She shook a silk slip down, her skin was fine-grained and white over the delicately boned arms, over the subtle modeling of throat and shoulders. She sat on the edge of the tub, drawing up her stockings, when Nelson poked his head into a crack of opened door.

"You most through?"

"All through." She slid her feet into the low-heeled sandals she wore about the house, and stood up, glancing at Nelson's rack to be sure he had towels enough. As she moved past him he caught her, looping a thumb and forefinger about each wrist.

"You don't look old enough to have a grown-up, famous son," he said. "Nothing but a sprig!"

Margaret reached up to kiss him, laughing. "You wouldn't notice, if my hair went white and my teeth fell out and—"

"I would so." Nelson gave her a little shake, and released her.

He's building me up, she thought, warmly, as she moved quickly about the room, closing drawers Nelson had left ajar, stripping back the blankets and sheets on the beds, brushing her dark hair into a smooth curve over her temples, curling the ends over her fingers into a roll at the

nape of her neck. She buttoned herself into a yellow dress, the white collar and flying cuffs above the elbows very crisp. She could hear Nelson's funny, interrupted whistle, she knew just how it came from a drawn-down corner of his mouth as he shaved.

"Say, Margie." He stood at the door, his face pink above the lathered chin. "Do you think John might like to go over the factory? This afternoon, maybe? It's out of his line, but I'd like him to see the improvements I've made."

"I think he would, if there's time." (Oh, darling! she thought. Wanting John to see what he had done, hoping his son would—well, find something to admit as achievement.) "If the program doesn't last too long, you could drive out there first, and then come back for supper."

"He might not care about it." Nelson wasn't really doubtful this morning; he just wished Margaret's approval. "I mean with all he has on his mind."

"You just ask him," said Margaret, and Nelson's brow smoothed out its long creases. He turned back to the mirror, whistling again, and Margaret went slowly down the stairs. If she had a chance, she thought, she would ask John to go with Nelson. She couldn't very well say, please pretend you are interested. John was older now. Perhaps he would be less engrossed. He had had, at twenty, a kind of imperviousness to other people and their desires. Not that he was selfish, exactly, at least not as her brother, Tom, still was. Nor ruthless, knocking people down to have his own way. Just impervious. Unaware. As if he were tuned to catch only the high vibrations of his genius and its needs, and lower, human sounds failed to reach him. She had thought, he needs to fall in love. Why should that girl pop into her mind again, Adelaide Hollister? Just because John had taken her to a dance ten years ago. He had been unhappy, Margaret was sure of that, but he had

gone away that summer. Since then, had he known any women, had he loved any? Nothing, at least, had side-tracked him from his straight swift flight upwards.

In the dining room the mahogany table was set, spread with a cloth which Mrs. Henderson had found yesterday in the linen closet, and patched. "Plenty good enough when we're here alone," she had said. Margaret looked at it, reflectively. At least, Nelson wasn't that way. She placed on the table the bowl with short stemmed, early daffodils which Nelson had brought home last night, straightened the silver beside each plate, and went on to the kitchen. The cereal bubbled on the stove, the coffee was made (it would be too weak, and Nelson wouldn't say a word!) and Mrs. Henderson stood at the white porcelain table, all the silver in the house except that for breakfast spread before her, her head, with a coil of gray hair anchored firmly at the crest by three long hairpins, bobbing in rhythm to the quick movements of her elbows, as she scrubbed and polished. She turned, her tongue just showing at the corner of her mouth, her face pursed energetically.

"You're up?" she exclaimed. "I thought I'd get this done before anyone showed up." She turned back to her scouring.

"Yes," said Margaret, and didn't add, with all that really must be done today!

"I suppose all your folks will be here good and early."

"I don't know when they'll come."

"Be a pretty fix if they all expect lunch."

"But we invited them for supper." Margaret put unnecessary force into her orange squeezing; the rind split, the juice spurted.

"Don't make me any of that," said Mrs. Henderson.

"You can't tell me all that acid's good for your stomach when it's empty."

"Full of vitamins." Margaret strained the liquid into glasses.

"Who ever saw a vitamin?" Mrs. Henderson turned, emphasizing her words with a soup ladle. "One of those modern fads, that's all."

(In a minute she'll point out how fine she brought up her two, thought Margaret. I wish Nelson would hurry up!) She carried the glasses of orange juice into the dining room, she lingered there, adjusting the toaster. She heard Nelson on the stairs, and ran back to put on the eggs.

"I don't think I'll go this afternoon," announced Mrs. Henderson. "Somebody ought to stay here to start supper, and I don't care about those high moguls celebrating John's being foolish enough to give away his money."

(I'm not going to coax you, if that's what you want, thought Margaret. Nelson stood in the doorway, scrubbed and shaved and pressed, a new tie, very blue, knotted under his collar.)

Mrs. Henderson swept the silver with a great clatter into a pan of hot water.

"What did you say, Mother? You aren't going?" Nelson peered at Margaret. "What you two been saying? That's all nonsense! What would John think if you weren't there?"

"He'd pay it no heed, as you well know."

"Didn't you even buy you a new dress?" Nelson laughed at her. "You know nobody could hire you to stay away. Come on, let's have breakfast."

He carried them easily into his sanguine mood. Mrs. Henderson stopped asserting herself, she gazed at her son with admiration, flicking imaginary dust from his cuff;

Margaret was gay, serving the cereal, breaking eggs into the cups. Before they had finished, a loud honking in front of the house announced the arrival of Gertrude and William Wagner. Mrs. Henderson ran out to greet them, the greetings were noisy, exuberant, as if they had been parted for months instead of only three days. The house seemed to contract as they entered, William booming out, "See how thin I am! Gertrude doesn't half feed me when you aren't there, I think I'll take you back tonight." He had an arm about Mrs. Henderson's waist, his head, with close-cropped reddish hair, rode forward on the heavy neck, he was strong and hearty and weathèred. "How's everybody?" He shook hands with Nelson, he swooped at Margaret, and with a glint of mockery in his hazel eyes, did not kiss her. Gertrude followed, carrying a basket, her light hair in careful waves under a new blue straw, her plump fair face placid, her large, shallow blue eyes non-curious, non-expectant. There were gold freckles on her round arms, the brilliant roses with which her blue silk dress was splashed stretched their petals over her full bosom, over her snugly girdled waist and hips.

"I was baking yesterday," she said. "I just thought I'd mix up some rolls and a cake for you. Where you aren't used to having so many extra—"

"You needn't have bothered, Gertie. Or were you afraid Will wouldn't get enough to eat?" Nelson's voice seemed louder, he laughed at his own jibe, for the moment he was aligned with Gertrude and his mother, they were his people, Margaret was alien.

"More likely Gertie was afraid she wouldn't have enough herself." Will gave Gertrude a smack with the hard palm of his hand. "How much you weigh now?"

"It's natural for us to be on the plump side," said Mrs.

Henderson. Her glance admired Gertrude, commiserated Margaret for her leanness.

"You know what happens if I try to diet," said Gertrude. "I just get cross."

"How about coffee and toast now?" asked Nelson, heartily. "It must be hours since you had breakfast." Margaret added, quickly, "Yes, let me make fresh coffee for you."

"Not a bit of it," said William. "We stopped at a gas station and tanked up on hamburgers. Just to be on the safe side. Didn't know when we'd eat again, with all these high jinks."

Gertrude giggled suddenly. "I was telling Will I didn't know when we'd got together with Margaret's folks. It's like a funeral, everybody coming back."

"Not exactly!" Margaret rose suddenly, the silver clinked as she picked up dishes. "If you'll excuse me, I'll clear the table." She went quickly into the kitchen. Don't mind them so much, she told herself. Even if they make Nelson seem like them? He's not, really. A funeral! They don't care about John, what he's done, what he is. In the dining room she heard Mrs. Henderson, loudly, "Now, Gertie, don't you touch a dish! Not with that dress on!" and Will, "She means take it right off, Gertie!" They refuse to be impressed, thought Margaret: they're being more themselves than usual! Nelson came to the doorway, slipping the cellophane wrapper from a cigar Will had given him.

"I'm off, Margie," he said. "Anything you want me to do?"

"Yes." Margaret beckoned to him, and when he stepped nearer, said in a tense whisper, "Take William with you!"

Nelson looked at her, and then, as a guffaw sounded, and a smart slap, grinned a little sheepishly. "He's just

having fun," he said. Then he kissed Margaret gently. "Don't you let anything worry you. This is our big day!"

Margaret's tension slackened, in a quick sigh. Whatever Nelson had in common with his family was no longer common! It had worn fine and wise with the years. "Yes, darling," she said.

"I'll take him somewhere for lunch before we come back," Nelson said. "And I was thinking, in spite of old Hollister, how about our going down to meet the train? John would expect to see us first off, not just perched on that platform, part of the audience."

"Yes!" Margaret darted toward the dining room. "I'll rush through things. You come back for me, the train's at one."

Nelson carried William off. "The girls have to get fixed up for the big doings," he said. "You come along and see my factory. I've got a new kind of fence, just what you need for that prize bull of yours."

Mrs. Henderson fastened one of her checked aprons over Gertrude's flowered dress. "Now you see to the rest of the house, and Gertie and I'll do the dishes." Margaret could hear them as she set the rooms in order. She thought, what do they find to talk about, they've been together all winter: the tone of their dialogue moved from light, inconsequentialness—practical matters, farm happenings, to a lower, guarded confidence, the tone in which women exchange symptoms, or comments upon a relative by marriage. Margaret laughed to herself, as she moved lightly through the house. Let them talk!

John's room was in order, just as he had lived in it, even to worn school and college books in the book shelves. His own three volumes, dignified in dark green cloth with gold letters, stood on the flat table he had used as a desk. *Theory of Electric Susceptibility*, John Henderson. *Quantum Prin-*

ciples, John Henderson, *Thermodynamics*— The sunlight picked out the letters, at least John's name was tangible and clear. Margaret had fitted a fresh blotter in the desk pad, remembering when she had given John that set of brass corners and pen rack for Christmas. Florence's room was across the hall, still a little girl's room, with ruffled dimity at the windows, and a colored Maxfield Parrish print on the wall. Margaret stood there in the hall between the two rooms, and the years while her children were living there, were growing up, rushed past her, not in images, but swiftly in their essence, in her knowledge of them, as one watches a long ribbon of motion picture film spin back upon its spool. She thought, without Nelson, I should be like the house, with empty rooms once used, no longer dwelt within. Some women are like that. Her own mother. Closing the door upon the room in which Peter, her brother, had died, knowing its emptiness always. Because there was nothing stable, nothing to build with, in Father.

Mrs. Henderson hurried up the stairs, puffing. "It's time I changed my dress. Your father's down there, in a state about something. I set out the dishes and silver on the buffet, but I didn't know what cloth you wanted on the table."

"I'll see to that." As Margaret descended the stairs she heard Gertrude's high giggle, and her father's voice, dropped into its lower register, "After all, if your brother's my son, you're my daughter. It's nice for a lonely old fellow to find a pretty daughter like you—" He broke off abruptly as Margaret entered the kitchen, and stepped briskly away from Gertrude, fingering his closely cropped gray beard.

"Hello, Father," said Margaret. (Couldn't he see that his gallantry, to a woman like Gertrude, was only the ridiculous antic of age?) "How are you this morning?" He

had groomed himself carefully, but he seemed to have shrunk inside his creased blue suit, as if the attrition of the past years, the drive of his contentious, restless self, his very refusal to accept age, were exacting more than a pound of flesh. His gray hair was brushed back from the square forehead and arranged to the best advantage over the widening bald spot at the crest of the head, his gray eyebrows bristled over eyelids which sagged, although his eyes still stared, slightly prominent, bright and hard, under the worn lids. Rust colored tie, and points of silk handkerchief to match, and age in the mottled skin.

"I've seen Hollister again this morning." His voice was imperative, his gesture choleric. "Whose son is this, anyway? Whose grandson? The man is preposterous! He wants to run the whole damned show. I gave him a few notes for the introduction, and he practically refused to use them! To cap it all, he practically ordered me to stay away from the railroad station! He'd arranged to have John met, there was no time for family matters then, all these distinguished men who wished to meet John before the ceremonies! I don't know what you're thinking of, Margaret, to allow yourself to be run over this way. I'm going down to that train. I'm going to greet my grandson when he sets foot on home soil again if I have to knock Hollister down and step on him."

For a moment dismay prickled through Margaret, an old dismay that drew strength from a childhood confused by such storms. Had he quarreled with Dr. Hollister, shouting at him? John would hate it, if he made a scene. Then she saw the way his veined hand shook, as he thrust it into a pocket, fumbling before he finally had it out of sight. (Oh, tired old man, with no glory of his own! Struggling endlessly to escape his own futility!)

"We'd planned to drive down," she said, gently. "Nel-

son and I. You can go with us. You won't need to knock anybody down."

Gertrude giggled suddenly, and clapped her hand over her mouth.

"It's just that I know what is suitable, on such an occasion." But he was running down, now. "You take a little man like Hollister, he just uses everything as a chance to show off! I know his type." He eyed Margaret anxiously, did she remember brighter days in his past? "When I was president of the sugar beet company, I conducted more than one banquet. And before that, when—"

"Gertrude!" Mrs. Henderson's loud call came from the upper hall.

"Yes, Mamma?"

"Come here, will you?"

Gertrude went, the heels of her perforated blue pumps tapping with solid, unrhythmic tread. (Just like her mother's, thought Margaret.)

"Come in and read the paper, while I change my dress." She led her father through the dining room, she remembered the cloth for the table; as she ran lightly up to the linen closet in the upper hall, she heard Mrs. Henderson, scornfully, "What was he yelling about?" She closed the closet door with a smart bang before Gertrude answered, unwarily, and hurried down again to spread the cloth. A fine embroidered hand-woven linen which John had sent her the first time he went abroad on a fellowship. She smoothed it into place over the polished wood. She'd better dress first, and then lay the table. Her father wheeled from the window as she crossed the living room.

"Are they both going this afternoon?" He jerked his head, indicating the stairs.

"Yes."

He smoothed his beard, his eyebrows inviting Margaret

to share the incongruousness of Mrs. Henderson at such a gathering. Margaret smiled. Then her father tiptoed quickly toward her, and in a low voice, asked, "Is your mother coming here, to the house?"

"She and Aunt Eliza are driving over."

"Hm." He ran a hand over his head, combing stray hairs into place at the exposed crest. "Well, let bygones be bygones." He shook his coat down into place. "It's been some time since I've seen your mother. I suppose she's changed a good deal."

"Now, see here, Father!" Margaret laid a hand on his arm. "You promise you won't set off any dynamite! With all these people—and John here just one day!"

"You know you can trust me, my girl." He was reproachful and magnanimous in one breath, and as Margaret started toward the stairs she saw that he was squaring his shoulders, holding his drooping eyelids wide, staring at his reflection in the long hall mirror. As her image met his there, he started, turned away, and rustled the newspaper loudly.

Now what, thought Margaret, was on his mind, as he stood there? What did he see in a mirror? Was he still a conquering hero, a gay bucko? His idea of himself interposed between his eyes and the reflection? She sighed a little as she climbed the stairs, thinking, if someone should strip him of his fiction, his fantasy, should for one harsh, cold moment make him see himself without illusion, he would crumble into a handful of dust. If Ethel had tried to destroy him before she left him, he had at least scrambled together shreds enough to make a front for the world. Nothing would ever be quite so feverish, so distressing, as that year when Ethel and Father had staged their grand passion. Ethel had been in her thirties, a sentimental widow on the make for a man; she had thought Father wealthy,

impressive, some rounds above her socially. And Father—Margaret could see him, striding up and down the living room, the night he had come back to elicit her aid. He wanted a divorce, after all. Marriage had certain advantages. She could persuade her mother. "You don't understand, Margaret. She's given me back my youth, my confidence in myself! We won't come back here to live, we mean to travel, she's rich— Tell your mother I'll settle everything on her." Margaret, laying out her suit, her blouse, sitting on the bed to draw on sheer silk stockings, thought: it's an age that's far more dangerous for most men than adolescence ever is, when life slows down, when they first suspect the terrible discrepancy between the dream and the achievement.

Mother had refused, at first, to consider a divorce. Father had insulted her, had humiliated her, why should she make anything easier for him? Tom had finally found the potent argument. Unless she insisted upon a legal settlement Father would throw away every cent on the hussy. And then—Margaret slipped her arms into the blouse, soft, cream colored chiffon, an extravagance, because she was John's mother, she would sit in the front row this afternoon—Father, in an exuberant gesture, had given Mother more than he had. He had always been elusive, evasive, secretive, about his finances. His gesture included property, houses, land, and the fact, as Nelson pointed out, that the property was mortgaged, did not alter Father's conviction that he had been generous. At that, he had given her much more than Ethel wished given. In a way, he had done that all his life, made exaggerated gestures, and then been ruined because other people, temporarily, believed them. Ethel, at the end, had said that she was tired of supporting him, she meant to get away while she had a dollar left. And Father had explained, with injury, that

Ethel had quite misrepresented her income. "Why, she asked me to take charge of her affairs. Otherwise would I have dropped all my own business connections?"

Margaret fastened her skirt in place, she looked into the mirror. The blouse was good on her, the soft folds were pleasant against her throat. She laid a finger on the crease between her brows. Her family wrinkle, Nelson called it; she always scowled when she thought over family affairs. Well, Nelson was good about them all. He never told her when her father or her brother asked for money. For Tom's career, if you could call it that, was like her father's, reduced in scale. Her father had had periods of prosperity. He had launched companies, he had been director—sugar beets, tung oil, copper mines—she couldn't remember half of them!—and when one concern sank, he had struck off with a glitter of spray to another which promised great things. Never anything small. Tom had gone to war instead of to college, and when he came home, the routine and confinement of a job in the bank brought on a nervous breakdown. He had gone West for a time, and since then had lived chiefly on prospects. The world owed him a living, and the world, these latter days, seemed insolvent. But Father had kept for years a kind of plausible charm, and Tom, at forty, was truculent and bitter.

Why should she stand here, feeling this nostalgia for the little boy who was lost in Tom, the young Paul Davies who was lost in her father? Perhaps Gertrude had been right, and there was something like a funeral in this homecoming of her son John; even Nelson had taken stock. She should think instead about John, or, if she was too upset for that, she could at least put her mind on practical matters, such as the instructions she must give Mrs. Kupfer when she came, the final arrangements about the supper. She powdered her nose, turned before the mirror

to see how the brown jacket looked. Nelson had said, "Now if you want some new duds, Margie, you go ahead." This suit looked well enough, with the new blouse.

As she opened her door, the telephone in the hall below rang loudly. She heard her father's clatter, as if he feared whoever rang might not wait. He looked up at her as she descended, his face lighted in sardonic amusement.

"That you, Mary? Well, well! How are you? Yes, it's me. You don't? Well, wait a minute, here's Margaret." He handed the ear-piece to Margaret. "It's your mother," he said, unnecessarily. "She doesn't want to talk to me."

"Hello, Mother," said Margaret. She heard a gasp, and then:

"Was that your father?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Right there, at your house?" Rebuke, restrained emotion in her mother's modulated voice. For all it had lost its deeper tones as she grew older, it could still provoke a fleeting, embarrassed guilt in Margaret.

"He dropped in this morning. Nelson's mother's here, too." (Right at the head of the stairs, listening!) "And his sister, and her husband." Margaret was handicapped by her audience, oh, it was a shame she hadn't been on hand to answer the telephone herself! "When are you and Aunt Eliza coming? Where are you now?"

"You expect *me* to come?"

"Why, of course, Mother! I wrote John you'd taken that long trip from the coast just to see him!"

"Tell her I'll clear out!" A vein throbbed on her father's temple, he waved his arm. "Tell her—"

"Sh!" said Margaret, and her mother's voice asked, "What did he say? I heard him!"

"You couldn't disappoint us all! Just for one afternoon, Mother. This is so much more important than personal feel-

ings." (That was the line to take!) "Don't you think we owe it to John?"

"Tom told me he was in town, but I thought he'd have the grace to stay away. He didn't think much of what he owed John or anyone else! I suppose now that woman has left him, he thinks he can worm his way back."

(If I don't persuade her, she'll never forgive me, thought Margaret. Mrs. Henderson was halfway down the stairs now, peering over the rail, her face creased knowingly. Behind Margaret her father made a little clucking sound, and then strolled away, as one who had no part in this affair.)

"Mother, Nelson's going to drive us to the train to meet John. Can't you get here in time for that? Wait just a minute." Then, loudly, so that her mother must hear her. "Mother Henderson, don't you and Gertrude want lunch before we start? Tea and a sandwich?"

Mrs. Henderson didn't mind. She plunked past Margaret toward the kitchen.

"Are you there, Mother?" The wires hummed faintly; Mrs. Davies was considering the presence of Nelson's mother. "You see, we can't discuss it over the 'phone. Please come along! Are you still in Bridgeton?"

Another moment of silence, and then, rather faint with its load of resigned sacrifice, "If you insist, Margaret. I don't wish to disappoint you or John. But Eliza wants lunch before we start. She can't drive on an empty stomach. She has a young man to drive us over. You seem to have your hands full anyway. We'll go directly to the campus. But I do think—"

"I'll look for you there," interrupted Margaret. "Dr. Hollister's given you and Aunt Eliza the very best seats! Just think how wonderful it is!"

"I don't think I can come to the house afterwards."

"Oh, you must see John!" Margaret made her voice warm, encouraging. "Good-by, darling, and thanks!"

"She decided to come?" asked her father, from the doorway of the living room. Margaret nodded. "You wouldn't think she'd hold a grudge so long," he said, reflectively, puffing out his cheeks. "Your mother's a remarkable woman, but stubborn. Very stubborn." He turned on his heel and paced briskly across the room, picking up a book, fitting on his nose glasses, beginning to read with absorption even before he sat down.

Margaret started toward the kitchen, laughter swelling like a bright bubble in her throat. Incredible, the way emotions outlasted almost life itself! Were you done with them when you were dead? Or was it death, just being done with them? When I am very old, she thought, I hope I shall be peaceful. And with the word, she thought of Nelson, almost as if his hand closed over hers.

They had a picnic lunch in the kitchen, her father bantering a little with Gertrude, trying facetiousness against Mrs. Henderson's pointed silence. Margaret was glad when Nelson and William arrived. Nelson looked at her, forehead creased, had everything gone all right, and she nodded. The men tramped upstairs to wash and brush their hair, Mrs. Henderson plodded up, and came squeaking down in new shoes, a black hat with an edge of veil perched on her twist of hair. Gertrude tucked up her mother's scolding locks and pinned them, she adjusted the black coat so that it fell apart in front, disclosing the bar pin with the diamond that rode her mother's high bosom. Margaret left the key under the rush doormat for Mrs. Kupfer, who would come at two, and they were off, in the two cars, with Margaret's father on the rear seat in Nelson's car in spite of his suggestion that he ought to ride with Gertrude.

IV

They reached the station early, and drew up in the parking triangle beside a bus and several taxis. Margaret looked about with a vague disappointment, as if she had expected—well, not a band, of course, but certainly more signs of an arriving hero and a receiving delegation. William climbed out of his car. He would see whether the train was on time. Mrs. Henderson wasn't going to get out until she had to. Her shoes hurt. Margaret's father couldn't sit still. He went briskly across to the baggage room, and presently Margaret heard him explaining something to the baggage man. She looked at Nelson, and he smiled, the wrinkles deepening at the corners of his steady eyes.

"Excited?" he asked.

"Um. But where is everybody? Do you suppose they aren't coming?"

"It's early." Nelson drew out a cigar, looked at it, returned it to his pocket. "I better not start it," he said.

William came back, his blue suit, his yellow shoes, his red hair bright in the pale spring sunlight. "Train's on time," he said, leaning an elbow on the door of his car. "Right on the dot." He held up his wrist for a glimpse of the watch. "Five minutes to go."

A long black car slid down the hill, drew in beyond the taxis. Margaret leaned forward to see it. For a moment it was closed, secretive, and then the doors waved open, and people emerged, Dr. Hollister, chunky, important, two elderly men she didn't know, and Adelaide Hollister, looking at this distance like a girl of twenty in her black suit, with a pale pink hat to match her blouse, a silver fox scarf graceful over her shoulders. She was talking to one of the strange men, her gestures full of animation, and Margaret thought, I hope John's found himself a girl.

Dr. Hollister did not glance toward the other cars, he marshaled his party into the station, and after a moment Margaret saw them strolling along the platform. At least her father had not intercepted them!

"That's a good car he drives," said William. "I suppose he gets a lot of graft off the college."

Then the train whistled at the crossing east of town, a shrill, imperative whistle which silenced them, which drew their faces toward the east, watching for the first glimpse of the blunt black thundering engine with its long feather of smoke, the whistle set in vibration taut strings of hope, fear, parting, meeting again, adventure, loss. It sounded that way in the night, when I was a child, thought Margaret, her heart beating as if it ran ahead of her down the shining tracks. I had forgotten.

"It's coming!" shouted her father, capering at the station entrance. "Come along!"

Nelson waved at him, and held the door open for Margaret. They stood on the platform, beat upon for a moment as the engine passed, by the slowing thrust and turn of rods and wheels, looking up at blurred faces behind the windows of the day coaches, hurrying along the cindered stretch beyond the platform, where porters jumped down and set their wooden steps in place. Surprising that there were other people who had no part in John's coming, strangers stepping down from the coaches, strangers meeting them, strangers mounting the steps, actually going away! Hadn't John come? Then Father, who had run ahead of them, shouted back, "Here he is!" and there indeed he was, walking toward them, unhurried, suitcase dangling from one hand, his head bent a trifle, his gait as casual as if he had set out for a morning stroll. He hasn't changed, thought Margaret, and went toward him. She wanted to spin out, oh, endlessly, this moment of seeing him again,

to hold its delight, its discovery. Her father seized the suitcase, had an arm about John's shoulders, whisked him toward Margaret and Nelson.

"Here's the boy!" He presented him possessively. See, my grandson!

Margaret laid her hands on John's arms, she looked up at him, his eyes, behind the dark-rimmed glasses, were affectionate and detached, his mouth had changed, she thought, it was older, firmer, when he smiled, his face was young again, recognizing her. She kissed him, and let him go, for Nelson to take his hand, to hold it, saying, "Well, well, you're looking fine! Have a good trip?"

Mrs. Henderson bore down upon them, like a hurried pigeon, maybe John didn't expect to see his old grandmother, for all he was so famous now she was still his grandmother, and suddenly she was crying, noisily. Gertrude said, "Why, Mamma!" and Mrs. Henderson blew her tears into her handkerchief. William said, "Maybe you don't remember me? Bill Wagner. Glad to see you." And then, with dignified forbearance, Dr. Hollister interrupted the family gathering. It was a great honor to have John with them, but there wasn't much time. The shouts of "All aboard," the creaks as the momentum of the engine jerked each coach from inertia into movement, the sound of the wheels turning slowly, then more quickly, drowned out his next words. John leaned toward his mother, amusement in his blue eyes. "See you later," he said.

"You want your suitcase?" shouted Father, as Dr. Hollister led John away. John did not hear him, but Margaret said, "He wouldn't want it. We'll take it in the car." She wished that she could see John's face, as he shook hands with Adelaide. She could see only that he kept that casual, unhurried, unperturbed posture, bending his head a little as the two elderly men spoke to him. "We might as well

drive right over to the campus," she said. "Even if we have reserved seats, there might be such a crowd—"

"We beat Hollister," said her father, leaning forward from the rear seat. "We saw John first! But I didn't have a chance for a word with him about his speech." He clutched at Margaret's shoulder as the car swung around a curve, and jounced himself back into place.

"Some day you'll get an awful crack, sitting on air that way," said Nelson. "I guess John's got his speech all made up without any help."

"He hasn't had much experience with occasions like this," Father boomed sententiously. "He might not realize the appropriateness of referring to some of the Davies ancestors. Take my grandfather, coming here when it was a wilderness, with his young family, building that grist mill. He founded the town, in a way."

"I don't know as John remembers much about that," said Nelson, dryly. Margaret laid her hand on his knee, the gentle pressure of her fingers said "Don't mind him, let him talk, John's your son." Nelson rolled his eyes toward her, and as he looked back at the road the corner of his mouth lifted in a hint of smile.

"If I had a copy of the notes I gave Hollister—"

"I thought John looked well, didn't you?" Margaret spoke with firmness.

"He didn't look a bit different, did he, Margie?" Nelson's brow had relaxed now, his face had lost its unaccustomed irritation. "Same John, no matter what he's done. Not even much older."

And Father, irrepressibly, from the rear, "Every inch a Davies! When I look at him, I see myself as a young man. You wouldn't remember, Margaret. Ask your mother, she'll tell you." This time Nelson winked solemnly at Margaret.

Nelson drove more slowly; they could see, down the

street of two- and three-storied frame houses, a space of trees and red brick buildings, the older part of the college. Margaret looked at the cars already parked along the curb; she thought, they've come to see John, all the people from those cars; the little procession of which their car was part moved from the same purpose. Nelson turned into a side street and backed into a vacant place. "With that fire hydrant ahead," he said, pleased, "I can get out when I want to. Good thing we came along early, looks like quite a crowd."

(He's thinking about showing John the factory. I hope he'll have time— Margaret stood beside the car, drawing on her gloves. The sunlight was brighter now, it picked up color along the street, the red of maple blossoms, the clear yellow of daffodils, the sharp green that began to show in patches of raked brown winter grass. I'll have to keep hold of Father, Nelson won't want him to go.) William drove past, edged into a space down the block, and they started for the campus, Margaret carried well ahead of the others by her father's impetuous rush.

"I hope your mother won't be late. She didn't allow much time. She'd expect them to wait till she got here!" He held his head high, he squared his shoulders, his gray beard pointed into the wind. "Does she know—about Ethel?"

"Tom's been over to see her."

"Um." Paul Davies scowled, and walked more briskly. "She'd have to hear, I suppose."

"We're way ahead of the others." Margaret pulled at his arm; she was a sea-anchor, dragged in his wake.

"They know where to go, don't they? See here, Margaret, sit next to me, will you?" He had a finger inside his white collar, tugging; his voice, under its peremptory tone, had an unexpected quaver. "I don't feel any too popular—except with you."

He was uneasy, then, under all his bravado. Margaret smiled at him, a trifle ruefully. Today she didn't want to feel the old role of buffer, she wanted a nice clear space in her mind, with nothing there but pleasure in her son. As they crossed the street to the edge of the campus, a group of seniors spilled down the steps of one of the halls, in caps and gowns, moving ahead under the old cedars, a lively flock of blackbirds. There were townspeople, too, strolling toward the distant corner where the new building, Henderson Hall, would climb up, brick by brick, into completion. Father walked briskly past the more leisurely people, they were only spectators, said his manner, and he had a part in this show. He elbowed his way, with Margaret following, through the first-comers, who stood outside the space roped off about the platform, the college guard in blue uniform took their names and stepped aside, the tasseled cord that barred the entrance in his hand. "Go around to the other side of the platform," he said, "you can get up there."

Of the figures standing on the platform, chatting, Margaret recognized the Congregational minister, several of the faculty, and Dr. Barry. She was glad he had come; he always had liked John. When he had retired, two years ago, Margaret had told him she never could be sick again, without him to call. And he had said, "But you haven't been sick. Not since you married Nelson." He knows more about the Davies family than we know ourselves, she thought, looking up at him. She hadn't seen him for months, in the spring sunlight he looked older, ashy, his fine, reflective eyes sunken, his lips colorless. As she started up the wooden steps he saw her, and came to meet her, his smile tolerant and ironic as always. "Well, Margaret! Congratulations." He held her hand a moment, his fingers dry and cold over hers. "How are you, Davies?" he said,

and Father, truculently, said he had never been better. Had Dr. Barry, perhaps, spoken his mind to Father sometime in the stormy past? "I've just been talking with your mother," he went on, and Margaret looked past him, startled; there on the front bench, partly concealed by other figures, sat her mother and Aunt Eliza. Her mother looked especially elegant this afternoon, in a new frock of dark green wool, with a scarf of soft marten about her neck; under the smart veil which flared from the small green hat her brown eyes were brilliant, her skin was firm, her skillful makeup might have been the slight flush of anticipation. Aunt Eliza, beside her, could have passed for her mother, except that there was nothing maternal about Eliza's appearance. For Eliza was frankly old, and saw no reason to pretend otherwise. She sat quietly beside her sister, wrapped in her Hudson seal coat, rusty in the sunlight; her brown eyes were sharp in sunken sockets, her skin was tight and polished, almost like bone itself, over the high arch of her nose, over the prominent temples, and an edge of straight white hair showed under her plain black hat. Margaret, moving toward them, thought, It's astonishing, how young Mother keeps. As if her intensity wore down other people and was a stimulus to her. And Eliza, who's had nothing— Eliza had seen her, and leaned forward, a flash of brilliance in her old face. (I ought to try to get over to her house more often, thought Margaret, guilty at the glimpse of affection upon which she made no demands.) She kissed her aunt, she bent over her mother, pecking at her cheek through the crisp veil. "Isn't it a fine day for John?" she said. "Did you have a good trip over? I'm so glad you got here early."

"We've been waiting some time." Her mother's eyes, malice-bright, met Margaret's for a moment, and then stared past her. "Why, he looks like an *old* man!" she mur-

mured, and her gloved hands shut tight over the suède purse in her lap.

"He is," said Eliza, laconically. "He's just a year younger than I am, and you're only three years younger than that."

Mary Stevens Davies did not hear her sister; she sat more erect, hostile and unwilling curiosity in her compressed mouth, in her averted eyes. A plank of the platform squeaked loudly, and Paul Davies stood beside Margaret, hat under his left elbow, the breeze upending the thin locks he had arranged so carefully. He extended his right hand tentatively, and then tucked it under Margaret's arm.

"Well, Mary! How are you?" His voice was hearty, but his hand dragged at his daughter's arm. "And Eliza! I'm glad you were able to get here. It's a great occasion! You'll be glad to know your grandson is looking very well. In fact, he's less excited than the rest of us, wouldn't you say, Margie?"

Aunt Eliza gave what, with less restraint, would have been a snort, and Mary Davies said, "For goodness sakes, put on your hat! You'll catch cold."

Father clapped on his hat. (She meant because he'd grown a trifle bald!) Nelson was ushering his mother across the platform toward them, Gertrude and William following importantly. Mrs. Henderson's eyes were like a squirrel's, round and inquisitive in her weathered face, as she nibbled at the hidden drama in this meeting of the two Davies. But Mary Davies said how-do-you-do, and she was very well, thank you, and how were Gertrude's children and the farm, in her best manner of formal courtesy, and Father said, "I'll see if I can locate Tom, he ought to be here by now, and my sister Janet, too." He jumped to the ground, stumbled, and went off briskly. Margaret sat on the bench beside her mother, Nelson and the members of

his family ranged themselves on the bench behind them. "Your father will probably come tearing back just as the speeches begin," said Mrs. Davies, bitterly. "Making himself conspicuous. He hasn't changed at all."

"I haven't noticed that any of us improves much with age," said Eliza. Mary Davies glanced at her, a quick challenging glance, and then, setting her lips together, refused to continue the discussion. Margaret thought, they probably had a time before they started, Eliza had to persuade Mother to come. Mother never stayed long with Eliza. "She's too set in her ways, like all old maids," she would say. And Eliza would say, "When Mary was a little girl, I suppose I spoiled her. I was so proud of her. But that's no reason—"

In the distance sounded the accented rhythm of a march, as the band started gaily. The beat of the music silenced the movement and the voices of the crowd which had been gathering beyond the roped-off enclosure, it silenced the chatter of the people standing on the platform, it collected attention, it heightened anticipation in its fourfold measure, which announced that feet were marching, that the ceremony was to begin, that here came, orderly and ranged, the actors in the scene.

"Where *is* your father?" whispered Mary Davies.

Margaret laid her hand over her mother's sleek glove. Queer, and touching, the way she picked up that old anxious responsibility about him! "See, there he comes, and Tom, and Aunt Janet, too!" Father convoyed them irresistibly through the crowd, he assisted his plump, elderly sister to the platform and turned to make sure that Tom followed.

"I wonder that Janet can bear to come," said Mary Davies, in quick undertone, "after the way her family has

turned out! She's a real Davies, nothing makes any difference except what she wants herself."

Margaret, watching the three edge past the benches which waited, empty, for the guests of honor, thought, they are alike, you'd know they were the same family. Janet was plump and composed, dignified in her black and white; she had for so long put up a determined front that at seventy she had become that front. Tom walked with a slight swagger, thrusting forward his heavy chest, his eyes aggressive between their heavy lids, his mouth hard. He looked very well today; had Nelson or Mother given him money for that new suit? Margaret sighed, thinking, he wears that contentiousness as an armor, he belittles the world to feel himself a man. He stood in front of them, with a careless nod to Nelson and the others. Mary Davies reached for his hand, and he laid the other hand on Eliza's shoulder, laughing at them, for a moment his mouth was gentle and amused. "Move along," he said, "and let me sit between you. One of my girls on each side." Eliza moved along the seat, gathering up folds of her sealskin coat, and Tom sat down, an arm about each of them. Eliza pursed her mouth, but her eyes were bright with pleasure, and Mary Davies laid a gloved hand on Tom's knee. "Now you can see that I behave. This is no place for me, sitting on a college platform while little Johnny does his stunt."

The music grew louder, the procession appeared from behind the library, sunlight glancing from polished instruments, from the whirling baton of the band leader, the spring wind fluttered the black gowns of the president and the visiting professors, there was just time to say how are you, Aunt Janet, before Father found a place for her at the end of the bench. He sat down next to Margaret, and wriggled a little, extracting a fountain pen, unscrewing the cap. "I'll make a few notes and slip them to John. No

use counting on Hollister." Behind them Gertrude giggled. "Don't men look funny dressed up like that?" Margaret's face burned with irritation; she hadn't had a minute to think about John, to realize what was happening. Her mother leaned forward to stare past her at Father, who was writing busily on the back of a crumpled envelope, shaking off a drop of ink from his pen, writing again. Mrs. Davies nudged Margaret. "What is he doing now?" she said, close to Margaret's ear. "Don't let him."

Father had finished his notes, returned the pen to its pocket, and sat balanced at the edge of the bench, watching the procession. "See, there are the radio fellows," he bounced as a young man scrambled up to the platform, bearing his portable microphone like a strange weapon. "They must of wired up just for the speeches." The band ranged itself below the platform, the march was finished, but the drums kept on repeating that steady rhythm of moving feet, one two three four! one two— (I like a march, thought Margaret, it makes me part of other people even when I sit here, not moving, except my toes!) President Hollister climbed to the platform, his mortarboard askew, his silk gown billowy, his purple hood bright in the sun. He stood, while the dignitaries mounted the steps, and Gertrude giggled softly again when one of the visiting professors, a dignified gentleman with a square white beard tried, unsuccessfully, to walk up the inside of his gown. "They aren't used to skirts," said Tom, and both Mother and Eliza said "Sh!"

There was John at last, hesitant at the edge of the platform, coming forward as Hollister beckoned to him. They had decked him out in a borrowed cap and gown, he was a dull figure among their banded silks and varicolored hoods. Margaret thought, they might have found him a longer gown, and pressed it for him! Then she smiled,

secretly, imagining the scene, with Hollister shocked that John had brought none of his trappings of honor. "We'll have to find something for you," he must have said. John was looking across the platform, his eyes found her, he lifted his head; this should soon be over, said his quiet, aloof face. Father, spying him, made a sudden lunge across the platform, wriggling past the benches, thrusting his envelope at John. Margaret could not hear what he said; John must have taken the paper, and Dr. Hollister made agitated gestures.

"What is he thinking of?" said Mrs. Davies, and her face seemed to shrink under the veil, netted with disapproval. "Margaret, can't you—"

Father pushed his triumphant way back, he settled beside Margaret with a gusty sigh. "You better watch out, or they'll throw us out," said Tom, twisting his mouth up at a corner, not moving his lips, and Mary Davies gave a tense, confirming nod. But Father had turned to his sister, Janet, and just then the drums gave the final roll, the band leader whirled his baton, caught it, held it aloft, and when he swung it down, band and students exploded into the college song.

Margaret glanced around, she wished Nelson was sitting next to her. He was just behind her, hands on his knees, gray felt hat pushed back from his forehead. He did not move as she turned, but there was a slight contraction between his sandy brows, as if he were startled. What had he been thinking? Margaret looked at him, his clear, steady eyes were grave and reassuring, and when she turned back she felt less pulled between the tense rigidity of her mother on one side, and the small restless, potentially explosive movements of her father on the other. I don't know what I'll do with them all at supper, she thought, but Nelson will be there. "Alma Mater, tried and true-oo-oo!" sang

the students. A little stir in the crowd standing beyond the ropes, the guard motioning, Adelaide Hollister ducking under the rope, dusting off her pale pink gloves, laughing as she talked in a low tone with one of the radio men. She shook her head, the delicate streamers of veil tied about the pink hat fluttering, she wouldn't come up to the platform, just stand there. She thinks she shows off better there, thought Margaret; but she couldn't see, now that the president and his guests were seated, whether John looked down at her or not. I must stop thinking about all these people, she told herself, and just listen.

The song had ended, and Dr. Hollister rose, clearing his throat, thumbing over his notes. This was, he said, a great occasion, when a native son, a graduate of this college, came home from the high place he had won in the world to lay the cornerstone, to dedicate the building which his genius had made possible. His genius, and hard work from the committee which raised the rest of the necessary funds. Perhaps the committee had genius, too. Someone had said genius was nine-tenths perspiration, the capacity for taking pains. Pain enough, the committee could vouch for that, in finding money these days. (Laughter, scattered.) But since the building was to be dedicated to youth, he, the president of the college, wished first to address his remarks to the student body, that part of the audience standing on the threshold—

Margaret ceased to listen to the platitudes. Dr. Hollister was, in effect, urging his seniors to go out and be geniuses, too. In youth, all things are possible. Is that so? asked Margaret, to herself. Don't you know John is different? Beyond her mother's hands, folded tensely over the purse, she could see Tom's hands, heavy, white, well-fleshed, fooling with a limp package of cigarettes, shaking out one cigarette, tapping it on a thumb-nail; before he

lighted it Mother's hand darted for it. Margaret had a quick glimpse of his face, sullen and bored, as he picked the cigarette from his mother's fingers, and poked it into a corner of his mouth, to dangle there, unlighted. Mary Davies gave his hand a cajoling pat, and he stretched against the single board which made a back for the bench, shrugging so that Margaret felt the board move. What was he thinking, wondered Margaret. Nothing, except to wish this would get over and he could light his cigarette and return to—oh, what did he do with himself all day? If she had stayed at home, if she hadn't married Nelson, would things have gone differently with him? He had been fond of her when he was a little boy. She could see Eliza's austere profile, sharp, hooked nose, the old skin of the throat stretched from the rusty fur collar taut to the prominent arch of chin and jawbone, as Eliza held her head high to listen. Eliza had stayed home all her life, and what good had that done? They were dead now, the father and mother for whom she had cared, the brothers—was it true that she had given up her lover—not that she called him that in those days!—because her small earning as teacher in the village school would help those brothers? What was she thinking now? Was she too, like Nelson, like Margaret herself, stock-taking? Margaret glanced around. Nelson had shifted his position, his shoulder supporting his mother, who slept comfortably against it, her straw hat tipped forward. Nelson lifted an eyebrow in humorous apology. Mrs. Henderson's head jerked, she righted herself, her eyes flying open in a blue, startled gaze, and then the lids drooped again.

She, at least, was untroubled by thoughts. Margaret turned back to Dr. Hollister. He had collected excellent quotations and mortised them well together. He had finished his admonition to the students, and passed on to the

strides made by science. "The scientist is the artist of to-day," he declaimed. "His imagination is an electric force, bridging the gap between the positive electrode of the known and the negative electrode of the unknown." This is my son, thought Margaret, he has moved from this little town into the world. But I can't get clear enough of the people around me, the family, to see what it means. Tom, swinging a leg over the other knee, restively. Father, coughing behind his hand, in a low explosive protest against these abstractions, Mother, frowning quickly at Margaret, Can't you keep him quiet? Not one of them was thinking of John, and of the honor he had brought to the family. Tom was bored, Father waited with increasing irritation for the reference to the Davies ancestors, a reference which would allow him to identify himself with honor, to claim it. Mother, perhaps it was difficult for her, seeing Father again, being separated from him only by Margaret. Ordinarily she would have had dramatic enjoyment in her platform seat, in her relationship to John. She would have felt the eyes of the crowd upon her, have heard the whispers in the small ear of her vanity, see, that distinguished woman is his grandmother. Now perhaps the voices of her past were louder than such whispers. And Eliza—and Aunt Janet—and the rest—

Margaret sighed, and then, suddenly, sat more erect. Adelaide Hollister was staring at them, her eyes lingering, moving on. At this angle her face looked thin, the delicate line from cheek-bone to chin curved in too far, there were lines not deep but distinct in the sunlight past the corners of the faintly smiling rouged lips. She looks tired, thought Margaret, and then their eyes met. Adelaide's face altered, her smile deepening, her quick nod impersonal, courteous. She turned away at once, looking up at her father, a model for listeners, one hand, in its

powder-pink glove, laid carelessly against the rope behind her. Margaret wished that she could catch a glimpse of John. But too many heads and shoulders intervened. Dr. Hollister had come now to the future of the nation, the future of the college, the purpose of this new building. Beyond him, close to the library, the arbor vitae trees wore their new budding tips like flecks of sunlight.

V

Eliza Stevens could hear Dr. Hollister booming along; unless she held herself rigid and strained, almost tipping her ears forward, she could not make out his words. No one talked plainly any more. He would make a good preacher, she thought, the way he went on and on. What she came to hear was John. John Stevens. No, John Henderson. John Stevens had been dead a good many years. But the past and the present wove back and forth so easily in her head, and the future, too; only the future had shrunk into something scarcely longer than the present, and the past was endless. When she woke, early this morning, she had thought today was already gone, and she had already seen them doing honor to John Henderson, her grand-nephew. She had been disappointed when she found the day was still to be lived through, but only because waking, rising, dressing, getting herself in motion again had become a real task.

She had a way, lately, of waking early, of thinking, now I must get up; then she would doze a little, and dream that she was rising, moving her body easily, without stiffness. She would listen for a moment at the door, to be sure that Susie, the little country girl who lived with her while she finished high school, was stirring in the kitchen. She would bathe and dress in a fresh linen frock, belting it about her

spare waist, she would brush back her thick white hair (she had had it cut when her arthritis made an agony of twisting the heavy coil around her head, and the family had jeered at her, thinking she aped youth. If they only knew how little she wished her own hard youth back again!), she would step lightly down the stairs. Then she would wake, and find herself still in bed, the pendulum of the steeple clock on her chest of drawers winking at her behind the stenciled landscape on the lower half of the glass door, and she would have it all to do over again, this time without lightness, with her dogged will testing knees, back, shoulders, to see whether age had overnight made further progress in its interference with her mechanisms.

This morning, however, once she had cleared away the confusion about the day—and she still had a decided feeling that she had already sat through these ceremonies!—she had not slept again. She never slept so easily when her house held a guest, and when the guest, as usual, was a member of the family, he came accompanied by such a host that all night they tramped through her dreams, they woke her early. This dignified and well-groomed elderly woman, Mary Stevens Davies, sitting beside her son Tom, had slept in Eliza's guest room, but a young girl with her dark hair in long curls and a wine-colored basque with pleated edging at neck and wrists had sat on Eliza's bed, her face vivid, her white, smooth hands eloquent, as she told Eliza just what the elocution teacher had said that afternoon; if Eliza could pay for lessons another quarter, then she would begin to teach herself. And a little girl, curls just the size of Eliza's finger over which they had been brushed that morning, clung to Eliza's hand as the two walked sedately along the village street toward the white frame school house, and parted in the dark hall, the child whispering, "When I pass, I'll be in your room, won't

I? I can read best of anybody in our room now, and the children all say that's because my sister is a teacher." Eliza had set her mouth firmly against her pride, and said, "See you get your arithmetic, too." And a young woman with a mass of bangs over her forehead and a heavy coil of dark hair at the back of her small head, with yards of white petticoats billowing out from an hour-glass waist, with ruffles over her bosom, had stood waiting for Eliza to slip over her head the plum-colored wedding dress of heavy silk. "You can't possibly understand," she was saying to Eliza. "Or you'd never expect me to wait a whole year!" Eliza had to set her lips again, this time against footless protest. Mary had been offered an excellent position, teaching elocution in a seminary for young ladies, but she had also met Paul Davies. Well, he had been handsome then, look at him now! and Eliza wouldn't say, I've waited five years, if you would help send John to college— Plenty of times in the years since then Mary had wished she had waited, not one year, but many!

Perhaps, on the whole, I've had the best of it, thought Eliza. You can't lose what you haven't had. Or could you? Sometimes she thought that having not much of her own, she had multiplied her trouble by sharing too many lives. I've lived too long, I've seen the beginning and the end of too much. When you begin to see the shape of the pattern, the way it repeats itself endlessly, birth, promise, waste, death, you had lived too long. For more than seventy-five years she had lived in her village, for almost fifty she had taught in the village school, there were grandchildren in her room the year she retired, grandchildren of the children she had first taught. She had thought, at the beginning, this is just until the rest of them get started, Mary, her brothers John and Thomas. Her ambition was a bright flood to sweep them upward to success, her love for them

was exigent, never easy. Because she asked so little for herself, she demanded more of them. There was no help for them from their parents. Her father had, by that time, lost the grist mill at the fork of the river (there were wars in those days too, the Civil War, and then hard times), and spent all his days in the shed behind the house, tinkering with cogs and pulleys and wheels, working out one of his inventions. Some day he would make their fortune, in the meantime his blue eyes saw nothing very clearly except the bits of bright metal and the vague and tantalizing image of his project, and his ears were deaf to everything except the whir of revolving small wheels. He scarcely heard Kate Stevens, Eliza's mother, when she emerged from her melancholy silence long enough to upbraid him for letting the family starve. "You wait!" he would say. "I'm getting it this time!" And yet in their youth they had possessed fire and hope enough to leave the land they knew and venture into the rough, just opening country of this state which then had been the frontier edge of the West.

Well, they were dead. Eliza had found her father, he had not come when she called him for supper, she had gone out to the shop, stepping hastily, in irritation, she had thought him asleep, his curly white head down on the bench, one arm in faded denim jacket under his forehead, his overalled legs sprawling each side the stool, and above him the intricate mechanism, shining brass cogs with meshed teeth, fine linked chains and dark strips of leather, his perpetual motion machine, still as death, still as his death. She had touched his shoulder, she had seen, caught in the teeth of a wheel, a shred of silver-shining hair, and his face, when she tugged him backward into her arms, was bewildered, until she touched his eyelids, to shut out the last of that blue gaze. Her mother, who had shed so

many tears in her darkened chamber, mourning, unreconciled, for the discrepancy between what she had expected and what a fate that seemed personal in its cruelty had given her, had been too shocked for weeping. Her ride to the cemetery (her face as the casket was lowered on its canvas bands had a look of bewilderment like that on Thomas Stevens' face, and from the same cause, perhaps!), that ride was the last time she left the house alive. They drove again, a few weeks later, with the black horses shaking their tassels at the lightness of their load. Eliza had wondered in what incalculable way Kate Stevens, like the machines behind the closed door of the shed, had missed the gentle, tinkering hands of Thomas Stevens.

Mary had brought her husband, Paul, to the second funeral, and John Stevens had turned up, brushed, shaved, sober. She had never liked Paul Davies, and from that day she had a reason she could give herself. His eye that roved so easily after anything female had disparaged her by never for an instant lighting on her, but that omission was not one she could admit. After the funeral they had gone back to the little house. There was no train until evening, and Eliza had made tea for them. "You're free now. What are you planning to do?" Which of them had begun on her? "Free for what?" she had asked, and Mary had said, "You've always implied the family tied you down." Free, at forty—what was it, five, six?—after half a lifetime? She could remember a strange moment when in the deepest dungeon of herself, jailed there by necessity and will, forgotten, her youth stirred, struggled up to its feet, thrust its face, wild, disheveled, against the bars of the narrow window, thrust a hand between the bars, grasping at air.

"I'll be lucky to keep my position in the school here," Eliza had said. "I couldn't get another. Not now."

Both John and Mary had looked at Paul, then, and he had stroked his black mustache. Cooked up something, had they? Eliza had braced herself.

"I suppose there's no will," Paul had said.

"A will?" Eliza was scornful. "What did they have?"

"In that case, the thing is to sell the property at once. I have a chance at an excellent investment for Mary, and John needs cash, to buy a practice, you said, John? The village is growing— You don't need a house this size—"

They had never forgiven her. Only last night Mary had said, "If you'd helped John, that time he wanted to buy a practice, he might have pulled himself together." For the house was Eliza's, deeded to her.

"You can stay here whenever you want to," she had said. "Or whenever you have no other roof over your heads. But I won't sell it."

Paul had threatened law. Eliza had taken advantage of her parents, they were old, helpless, incompetent, they would wish all their children to share, Eliza had been given a home there for half a century! John was his mother's favorite. Eliza had stood up. She could remember now the way her lonely anger had tightened the skin over pulses in wrists and temples and breast. "They were incompetent," she had said. "They might have died in the poor-house, if I hadn't paid off the mortgages. To send you to college, John, to make you a doctor, to set Thomas up in business, to educate Mary. All these pinching-patching-scrimping years of mine! Go to law? Go, and be damned."

She had taken it harder than she needed to; death had a way of bringing out the vulture in surviving relatives. John had stamped off in a rage that day, but he had been glad to come home before he died. And Mary had come back, at first on brief punitive expeditions, to show her husband that she wouldn't stand the way he was acting,

and then for those weeks of shocked humiliation when Paul ran off with that chit, with her son Tom galloping back and forth between them until she consented to the divorce. She'd been better off the last ten years, Mary had, with a good income and no man to bother her, than ever before. And yet look at her this morning, watching him every second. She'd made fuss enough about coming to these exercises, when she heard he was in town. "Never let me lay eyes on that man again!" she had cried. And now she acted as if she couldn't take her eyes away from him. It would have been in better taste, thought Eliza, if Margaret hadn't got him a seat here on the platform even if he was her father. Small credit he was to the family. Between them, he and Mary hadn't done Tom much good. Eliza glanced at her nephew, he rolled his eyes at her in mock despair, how long did they have to sit here listening to this gab? She could see the fine scarlet tracery of blood-vessels at the corners of the eyes, the over-heavy, pallid flesh of cheek and chin, and she thought, his future lies there, I could tell him how it will go, his eyes are like my brother Thomas's, he is one of the world's fugitives, I am glad that I am old, I shall not need to watch his end. He winked at her, drolly, and Eliza could feel affection for him rising with slow warmth over the surface of her thoughts. He still treated her like a human being, he liked to joke with her, and if she knew he did it partly to gain some end of his own, what matter? With half a chance, he might have made a name for himself— Ah, so might any one of them, all the wasted men and women!

Eliza leaned forward, shifting on the hard bench. How much longer was that little popinjay going on? She listened, he'd reached the state of the world now, that would probably take him some time. She couldn't make out which of the gowned figures was John Henderson. She ought to

be feeling pride in him, instead of drifting about in the past this way.

Eliza glanced down the row before she straightened back in her seat, but she couldn't see Margaret's face; she could see Paul Davies, his pointed beard sticking up in the air, looking as if Paul were about to follow it in one of his sudden bursts into activity. Eliza hoped he and Mary wouldn't manage to ruin the day for Margaret.

Margaret must be pretty pleased. It seemed only yesterday she was standing up against her mother about marrying Nelson. Mary had taken that hard. Eliza, finally, had spoken plain words to her. "You didn't think much of your own future, when you wanted to marry Paul Davies, did you? Nor of what I hoped for you?" Mary had gone to bed with a heart attack, but when she got up, Margaret went straight ahead with her own plans. Eliza had never seen anything in the stolid, slow-moving Nelson to inflame anyone's heart, but it was Margaret's choice, not hers. Marriage had changed the girl. She had settled down, dulled a little, taken on the protective coloration Nelson wore. No doubt she was happier. But Eliza remembered, with a sense of loss, the luminous intensity of the young Margaret, her despairs, her ecstasies. Partly jealousy that ails me, thought Eliza. She didn't need me, once she had her Nelson. She forgets all about me, except when we meet, like this, and then she looks at me with kindly eyes, and I see her think, poor old Aunt Eliza, I should do something for her!

Eliza lifted her head, her hat slid back from her high, lined forehead, the nostrils of her proud, hooked nose flared. She'd have them know she wanted none of their sentimental, mawkish pity. There was another pity, another brew, strong and bitter on the tongue, which she felt for them, the dead and the living, a pity for waste, for ruined promise—her father, her brothers— (Their disin-

tegration had crumbled in her heart!) Mary's dead son Peter, and Tom, here beside her, Mary herself—

She could feel this pity for Paul Davies, too, but only when she thought about his life, not when he sat so near her. If he hadn't married her sister, she might grant him a grudging admiration for the way he played tag with age and failure, refusing to admit that he had yet been caught. And his sister, Mrs. Janet Gardner, sitting there beside him, well-cushioned, bland. Her sons, three of them, had been true Davieses, almost as if their father, hard-working, simple Dr. Gardner, had contributed nothing to them but his name. He'd worked himself to death providing for them, but he'd left Janet well fixed. Eliza could remember the annual exchange of visits between her and Mary, each of them a young mother with three children, the rivalry between them so sharp the children caught it. Well, one of Janet's sons had died in France, and who knew what had happened to the other two? You'd never find out from Janet. What do they think about, she or Paul, if they wake, as old people must, with sleep a thin web over that hard, endlessly-stretching hour before the day begins to lighten?

Eliza shrank, pulling her elbows tight against her sides, her fingers closing over the soft fur of her coat, as the sudden, hollow-smack sound of clapping rose all about her, from the crowd, from the people sitting on the platform. Tom nudged her. "Hey, give him a hand for stopping!" he muttered, out of the corner of his mouth. "Now it's little Johnny's turn."

"Rah for John Henderson!" Margaret reached for her father's arm, pulled him down beside her on the bench, and Mary Davies gave a little jounce. Eliza could see her grand-nephew now, as he rose, his head shooting up above the president's. He had taken off his tasseled cap, the black

gown dragged back carelessly from his shoulders, the sun glinted on his spectacles, he stood with a kind of negligent quiet, his head bent a trifle, as if the final eulogy from Dr. Hollister described another man, a stranger to him. I suppose he's used to it, thought Eliza. She bent one thin hand, trembling, behind her ear, to catch the words. He doesn't look very different, she thought, for all he's done. She had never seen much of him. When he and his sister Florence were little, Margaret used to drive over to Bridgeton sometimes for a Sunday call, but as they grew older they found other ways to spend their Sundays than sitting in Eliza's living room. Eliza hadn't blamed them; she had thought, I won't have to care what happens to them if I don't know them well enough to love them. The circle widened so with each generation, Margaret had Nelson's people on her hands, too. In spite of herself, Eliza had watched. When John graduated with honors, she had said to no one, all the Davies men, all the Stevens men get off to a good start. When he had gone East, she had thought, A boy like that, loose in a big city! When he had gone abroad on that first fellowship, she had thought, So far so good, you can't tell yet. But she had started then to save items in the newspapers, deriding herself as she took them out to read them over, the first ones dry and yellow now. Plenty of time yet for him to prove a flash in the pan, like the others. Now, as she stared at him, her eyes bright and dry, the lids burning, she thought not of the incredible honors he had won, she thought, How is it with him, I cannot see him clearly enough, he holds himself easily, he is not full of pride or vainglory—

John had lifted his head, as Dr. Hollister finished with, "And so, I present to you our most distinguished son, a man the world is proud of, Dr. John Henderson." The applause boiled up around John, he nodded at Hollister, he

waited a moment, unperturbed, while the radio men made a flurry adjusting the microphone, and then, not lifting a hand for any gesture, John spoke. Eliza's hand stiffened at her ear, her other hand pressed hard against her knee, she could hear his voice quite plainly, for all he spoke as if he were talking to a neighbor. He was glad to come to the exercises, because he thought it was time they had a new physics building. Then he told some stories about the way they'd had to make out in the old building, and the crowd laughed. What he had done himself was important only as it was a part of the sum total of knowledge that men needed if they were to come to any understanding of the earth. This new building would give a chance to younger men to train—

He lives in a different world, thought Eliza, folding her hands together, listening no longer. A world peopled by seekers, by men who give themselves for a distant goal. His city is one not built by hands. He has found full use for himself. I should like, some day, to tell him about my father. That was the world he longed to dwell within, but he never found the way, his city was no more than a mirage.

What were they doing now? John was stepping down from the platform, the president and the other elderly men in their floating robes, their hoods catching sunlight in folds of purple and yellow and scarlet, were following. Everyone got to his feet, Margaret turned as Nelson reached forward, touching her shoulder. "Pretty good, wasn't he?" Eliza saw the tears on Margaret's lashes before she dabbed at them with a handkerchief.

"Much too brief." Paul Davies stood on tiptoe, almost lost his balance. "Too damned modest, no use in being too modest."

"Sh-h!" said Mary Davies, in an imperative undertone.

The band was playing again, a hymn this time. "How firm a foundation, ye Saints of the Lo-ord—" Well, that was no doubt appropriate. Eliza's knees creaked, she could feel the bones rub in the dry sockets, as she rose. She couldn't see very well, the black gowns clustered about the corner of the foundations, John had a trowel in one hand, but the gowns hid him as he stepped forward, and then slowly the polished square stone descended, with the edges of the date carved on its face throwing short black shadows into the figures, settled slowly, the music of drums and horns drowning the faint creak of chains sliding through the heavy blocks of the tackle, as the workmen let it down over the sealed chamber where one of John's books waited for posterity or dust.

VI

"Listen, Margie." Nelson's face, close to hers, twitched excitedly. "If I can get hold of John— Could you ride back to the house with your mother and Eliza? Will says he'll take your father. That is, if John wants to go with me."

"If you can get anywhere near him!" Margaret laughed a little. The band was marching away to its own loud music, but no one seemed to follow. People ducked under the ropes, someone pushed down the posts which held them, and the crowd flowed in around the group of black-gowned figures.

"Gangway here! The Press wants a picture!" shouted a voice, and the crowd parted. Paul Davies teetered at the edge of the platform, he snorted as Dr. Hollister arranged himself beside John Henderson, directly in front of the polished granite stone. Margaret thought, oh, dear, he ought to brush down his hair! But she couldn't very well

call that out to her son, the pictures were taken, a reporter with a notebook was at John's elbow. Before she could catch his arm, Father had jumped from the platform, elbows spread he pushed through the barricade of onlookers, straight to John's side. Mother, standing behind Margaret, gave a gasp of horror. But Nelson grinned. "He'll do no harm," he said in an undertone to Margaret, "they won't pay any attention to his ancestors." Margaret could hear a phrase or two, "Some mention of John's great-grandfather, a pioneer minister in the state, a great man in his day. The name is Davies, D-a-v-i-e-s, not Davis."

Dr. Hollister looked as annoyed as Mother, he was scrambling for a pocket under folds of silk robe, he presented the reporter with a copy of his speech.

"I am not going to stir a step through that mob." Mother sat down again, very erect, looking about accusingly.

"No need our hanging around." Will Wagner had Gertrude on one arm, his mother-in-law on the other. "We'll see you at the house." He convoyed them down the steps, they rounded the platform and disappeared.

"I think we might as well start back, Eliza." Mary Davies looked up at the stiff back of her sister, who stood at the edge of the platform, intent on John. "Did you hear me? Margaret has so many for supper—"

"I'm not going home yet." Eliza did not turn. "I want to see John."

Tom vaulted to the ground, and sat on the platform, lighting a cigarette.

"Oh, I want you all to come," said Margaret, absently. How had that Adelaide Hollister contrived to make her way through the crowd? She was clinging to her father's arm, rolling her eyes at John. John smiled at her, and went on shaking hands gravely with the people who pressed around him. Perhaps he would have preferred to go to

dinner with the Hollisters, thought Margaret, and Nelson said, "Do you think I better ask him to look over the plant?"

"Of course!" Margaret spoke stoutly. "This will be over in a minute."

Dr. Barry, who was following the other platform guests, turned, as if he had heard her, and came back, setting his feet down with a kind of uncertain weariness. Tom slipped off the boards and walked away. "Well, how's it feel to have a son like that?" Dr. Barry wasn't really asking a question, the long folds of eyelids were reflective. "Remember how I took his tonsils out? I was being glad I hadn't botched that job."

"I should think you might be," said Eliza, with asperity.

"Well, I always thought he was a nice little chap, even if I didn't expect this. Still, if we hadn't cured his anemia—" He smiled at Margaret. "We all want a part in it, don't we? Somehow, it sets us scratching around in the past, digging out withered roots of the ambitions we started with ourselves." His glance moved slowly from Margaret to Eliza Stevens, who, watching the crowd about John, was not listening to him, to Margaret's mother, who had turned away, tapping one suède-shod foot, smoothing her gloves, with an air of how long must I be kept waiting? To Tom, who lounged, smoking, bored, at the edge of the crowd. I wish I knew his thoughts; Margaret felt a quick protective disturbance. Wondering, perhaps, how John happened in such a family? "How long is John staying with you?" Dr. Barry asked, as his eyes lingered finally on Nelson's face.

"He's not staying at all," said Nelson, and Margaret added:

"He has to take the night train, he says. A piece of work he can't leave." Margaret's tone had a note of

apology, he'd like to stay with us, his people, but he is too busy.

"Give him my regards." Dr. Barry lifted a veined hand a moment toward the close throng about John. "I won't try to get through that. Tell him we're proud of him."

"What would he stay around here for?" asked Eliza abruptly. "If he'd stayed here, he'd been like the rest of them!"

"Is it the town, Miss Stevens?" The two old people stared at each other, the ironic lines deepening about Dr. Barry's mouth, Eliza's dark eyes almost black under the arched lids. For a moment they confronted each other, sharing not so much knowledge as a long look, an inclusive panoramic look, which they alone had climbed far enough, (that darkening hill!) to gain. Then Eliza shrugged, and Nelson said, placatingly, "It's not a bad town, at all. Maybe John found more to work with in the places he's gone."

Dr. Barry lifted his hat and walked slowly away. Mary Stevens Davies said, "How tiresome he's grown! He didn't once ask me how I felt, and when I think of all the doctor's bills I've paid him!"

"He's not practicing now," said Eliza, dryly.

"I'll see if I can round up your father." Nelson swung down from the platform. "You don't want to wait here all the rest of the afternoon."

"Paul said you wanted all of us to come to supper, to see John." Aunt Janet Gardner had stood unnoticed long enough; her face, suddenly, looked like Father's, in spite of its plumpness, the aggressiveness of nose and chin somewhat softened by the full, crinkled cheeks. "I have to get the bus back, I won't have time to go to the house. John didn't make a very long speech, did he? I couldn't help thinking"—her sigh swelled—"that if my Jerry had

lived, you would have heard from him. But he gave his life for his country."

"Yes," said Margaret. "I'm glad you could come to the program."

"I felt every Davies should be here." Aunt Janet patted her eyelids. "Tell your father to drive over to see me. I'll just make that bus." She pecked at Margaret's cheek, her wave at Mary had discreet hostility (she had divorced Paul, hadn't she?) and moved away with an effect of a figure drawn along on wheels, so little did her quick, short steps disturb her solid erect body.

"We haven't heard much about her other sons," said Mother, and then, seizing Margaret's arm, "Where's Tom going? Tom! Oh, Tom!"

He heard her, and waved. "See you at the house," he shouted, and pushed through the bystanders, arrogance in his tilted hat, his swinging shoulders.

"Oh, dear," said Mary Davies. "Now we may not see him again. I knew this would upset him, poor boy, the contrast— Your father might have kept an eye on him."

"He's not a child," said Eliza, curtly.

"There comes Father!" Margaret intervened. "Here are the steps, over here." She started across the platform, the boards were noisy under the feet that followed her. The Hendersons would be pleased if Tom turned up drunk, she thought. Father had evidently dropped his gray hat and walked on it; he was brushing it with his elbow, hard, and his thin hair waved above his scowling brow. His laugh, as he came up to Margaret, was shrill.

"Damned whippersnappers," he said. "I don't mean John. The rest of them. What you want? Nelson said you wanted me."

"Aunt Eliza's going to drive us home. The others have gone ahead. Nelson's going to bring John."

"I'll wait for them." He ran an abrupt hand over his hair, clapped on the felt hat, and glinted at Mary Davies. "Unless you want me to come," he finished, audaciously.

Mrs. Davies pursed her mouth, her veil rocked from the small hat, and Margaret, in the energy of exasperation, hooked one hand under his elbow and swept him along, her mother and Eliza following.

"The boy said he'd wait in front of the church," said Eliza, a crackle in her voice. Margaret thought, well, I'm glad if she sees something funny in this combination, I don't. She had a moment of forlornness, as if Nelson had selfishly abandoned her to all the family problems. Then she stepped along more briskly. Nelson just wanted a chance to show his son what he had done.

The car was waiting, the boy lounging against the fender. "You see, there isn't room." Father made a last attempt to return to the center of the day's stage. "I'll wait for—"

"Mary can sit in front with Bertie," said Eliza. "I don't take much room sideways, we can get in the back seat." And Father was wedged in between Eliza and Margaret, tightly enough to reduce his restlessness to an occasional wriggle.

"Biggest crowd this college had," he said, boastfully.

"I seen a bigger the time they played Notre Dame," spoke up Bertie.

"I didn't mean football." Father leaned forward, wrenching himself past Margaret's arm, to poke Bertie. "That's not the way. Turn down here. Melrose Avenue."

"Sure," said the boy. "I been there before, driving Mis' Davies. Less traffic this way."

Mother had not moved since she arranged herself next the driver, except a little resistant jerk of her head as the car hit a rough spot in the winter-eroded macadam. I will

endure this if I must, said her tense back. Margaret was glad the drive was a short one. When they turned into the home block, the street was empty, not a car parked at the curb, just small petals of color where the maples had begun to drop their keys. No one had come before them, then; Will hadn't hurried back. If he stays away till Nelson comes, thought Margaret, with Gertrude and his mother—

Eliza shook off the hand Father offered, and descended backwards from the car, straightening her tall body slowly. Mother edged under the wheel, and stepped out the other door, adjusting her fur scarf, shaking down her skirt. Father made a gallant show of assisting Margaret to alight.

"What time does John's train go?" Eliza had opened her large, shabby purse, and drawn out a knit coin pocket.

"You aren't going to wait for that?" Mary Davies protested.

"I'm going to see the last of him. I don't care what time we get home."

Bertie had climbed back into his car. "He goes at seven," said Margaret, with a queer shock. At seven the day would be over, the day for which she had waited, over, and she had not yet had time to realize, except for a brief moment as John was speaking, that he was here, that the day was here, was going—

"You go get yourself some supper," Eliza dropped coins into Bertie's hands. "Get back here in time to drive me to the station. I guess you can drive us home in the dark, can't you?"

Bertie could. He'd turn up about six-thirty. He backed with a flourish out of the driveway.

"You aren't used to night driving," said Mary Davies, disapprovingly.

"I'm not used to a famous relative," said Eliza. "I want to see him."

Margaret touched the gnarled knuckles as Eliza snapped shut her purse. "So you shall!" she said. "To the last minute!" Gratitude rose warmly in her throat, easing the cords the others knotted about her. "After all, this is a celebration, isn't it?" Her tone cajoled her mother. "Come along, we must have supper ready when Nelson and John come."

She walked between them up the path to the house, the hedge of barberries had stems threaded with tiny green beads, the lawn which Nelson had cut so carefully (no, it's good for my paunch, I'd rather do it myself!) sent up a faint sweet odor of growth, the row of iris along the edge of the porch thrust up spikes of buds in paper-dry sheaths. Eliza is proud of my son, she thought; it's nice she could come today, I'll put John next her at the table.

"Use my room, Mother. At the end of the hall. You'll find towels in the bathroom."

"There's somebody in the kitchen, I didn't go out." Father was reproachful.

"That's Mrs. Kupfer." Margaret hung her hat and jacket in the hall closet. Father beckoned to her as she closed the door, and led her into the living room, with a little shrug at the two women who climbed the stairs.

"Your mother's pretty edgy, isn't she? You think I better stay?" His smile was a trifle sheepish, he pulled at his pointed beard. "I rather thought she'd see it was more dignified if we patched things up, now that John's sort of put us on the map. I'm willing to admit I made a mistake. Lots of men do. Why, if she'd cared a rap about me, she'd hung on. Instead of taking all my money and letting me go. Why, if some woman got to chasing after Nelson, you wouldn't just sit back—" His voice was choleric, his eye-

brows bristled, suddenly tears rose under the long folds of eyelids, rolled down the creased cheeks. "We're getting old, we haven't many years left."

Margaret, listening, had briefly the bewildered discomfort of her youth, when first one and then another of her family would jerk her from any safe middle ground where she tried to walk, and immure her in one of these edifices built of desire and self-defense, curtained so closely with a fabric woven of small bits of truth and long threads of specious reasoning and accusation, that she could see no light, could breathe no clear air. Their houses were out of plumb with facts, but if you lived always in a leaning tower, you could not know the ease in straight and plumb-true beams. Wasn't Father, even now, as he drew out a handkerchief, a crumpled one, not the rust silk folded in points in his breast pocket, eyeing her above the dignified pats he gave his eyelids? A car was stopping in front of the house, Margaret heard the motor race a moment before it was silenced, heard a door open.

"Someone's coming," she said, hastily. "This is no time—" She gave his rumpled, thin hair a quick pat. "Go spruce up a bit. I've got this whole family on my hands—" Willful, slipping bits of quicksilver, eluding her effort to roll them together smoothly just for an hour or so. "You'll have to keep an eye on Tom, if he turns up. I do want everything perfect— John's done so much—"

"He couldn't do the one thing I asked." Paul Davies' mood had shifted, his self-pity burned off in a spurt of anger. "He's as much Davies as he is Henderson. Too bad if his success has gone to his head, so he can't give any credit. Anyway, I saw to it the newspapers got the background."

Margaret drew herself up with a quick intake of breath, rage rose in her in a long curve, like a wave, and broke

into bright spray, so that she swung on her heel to hide her laughter, the hall door had opened, she moved toward it. Nelson walked in, and behind him not John, but Tom, her brother. "What happened?"

Nelson took off his hat and rubbed a finger over the crease left in his square brow. "Nothing," he said. His eyes, under the sandy lashes, met Margaret's, almost in apology. Don't mind, they said; it doesn't matter much. "There didn't seem to be time. Anyway, the factory will keep, he'll get home oftener now, perhaps." Already he felt better, telling Margaret. "They wanted John to look over some of the plans. Hollister asked me to come along, into his office, but I didn't think I'd better. They're going to drive him over when they're through." He set his hat down on the hall table, stroking the crown slowly. "One of the architects was there, some question had come up."

"I'm sorry," said Margaret. "They might have let us have him! There's so little time."

"Little Johnny's a big man now, the flower of the family. He can't be bothered with us." Tom lounged in the doorway, his cigarette wagging at a corner of his mouth as he spoke. "Hell, what's the use of my hanging around? I told Nelson—"

"Is that you, Tom?" Father burst into sight at the doorway. "You come on! I need your moral support." He danced a little on his toes, his grin at Margaret was placating and naïve.

Another car drew up before the house, and Margaret moved eagerly forward. "Just your in-laws," said Tom, carelessly. "Not the white-headed boy." He flicked a thumbnail at the head of a match, his eyelids twitched as he lighted another cigarette.

"I'm glad Nelson picked you up," said Margaret, quickly, as Mrs. Henderson bulged out of the car door.

(Under the bravado his eyes were wretched.) "You stay. I've got a lot of good food, and Father's right, he needs a bodyguard." She moved away from the door, down the hall, her fingers brushing Nelson's as she passed him. "You take care of them, will you? I have to see about supper."

VII

John Henderson, his gown folded over his arm, mortar-board pinned under an elbow, walked up the library steps, President Hollister behind him, calling back final words of congratulatory farewell to the groups of men who lingered, chatting. John wondered what his father had wanted to drive out to the factory for; he probably had a new machine, something to exhibit. His sanguine, ruddy face had grown quite red at Dr. Hollister's expostulation. "I'll get over to the house as soon as I can," John had said. After all, this was why he had come west, there were things to finish off. It might have been interesting to look over the factory, as the place where he had come nearer to spending his life than his father ever guessed. If—

Adelaide Hollister stood at the top of the steps, in the shadow of the wide doorway, smiling a little as he mounted toward her. He had watched her during the exercises. Most of the time she had stood with her head lifted, the line of her profile and throat delicately attentive; at least twice he had run full tilt into her steady gaze, and she had not started and turned away, she had looked up with deliberate scrutiny. Well, he had wondered whether she would be here, he had wondered whether at the sight of her his knees would melt, the old stifling fiery awkwardness would rush over him, as if she changed the very texture of his blood. Had he guarded himself too closely, waiting for some flicker of emotion, so that his mind made a

barrier past which no feeling could move? She had changed: if he remembered less distinctly the way exquisite color had touched the hollow under the smooth cheek-bone, the way her mouth curved in laughter, the exact stroke of lashes as her lids swept up, he would not now see how changed she was. Her eyes made conscious use of the long lashes, in repose her mouth had fretful lines, finely etched, past the corners, her gestures, as she smoothed her pale gloves, as she drew her long scarf of silver fox closer to her throat, as she thrust her fingers negligently in a pocket of her short jacket, all had a busy little awareness of herself. She hasn't found what she wants, thought John, as he reached the step on which she stood.

"The blueprints are in Father's office. Do you remember the way?"

"I didn't hang out much in the president's office, when I was in college."

"Does it seem ages ago?" She stepped with him into the hall. In front of them the wide stairs mounted to a landing, where they divided; above the landing hung a large oil painting of the first president, the sunlight through the windows on either side blurring the canvas so that nothing looked down, nothing except one large white hand, a forefinger marking a page in a book. John did not answer, and they passed through the empty outer office, typewriters neatly hooded on the desks, through the small office of the president's secretary, and came into the guarded interior of the president's rooms. "Sit down, John. Or should I call you Dr. Henderson now? You must be tired, such a long trip, the exercises, everything." Adelaide stood beside her father's desk, her fingers moved slowly over the glass surface, she caught a sigh as it parted her lips, her eyelids fluttered. "You've done so much—and I've just stayed here—"

She didn't actually say, waiting for you, but the phrase was implicit in her posture, in her glance.

(Her voice is different, thought John. Higher.)

"It was wonderful of you to remember this funny little college, after you had done so much. I was petrified for fear you wouldn't think it worth while to come back— It means so much to—to everyone—to have you here." Her vivacity was overemphatic, her laugh tinkled. "Must you really go back at once? There is so much to talk about—"

(I needn't have dreaded seeing her again, thought John. She is less real than her shadow which has followed me all these years.)

"Although you aren't a bit more talkative than you used to be! You really haven't changed much, have you, John? I thought you'd be—oh, pompous, impressive, and you're just the same, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't know," said John. "I haven't thought about it."

"I've thought about you, just heaps! You never married, did you? You see— I didn't, either." She was drawing off her gloves, John watched her hands, small, white, the fingers full and blunt under the pointed, pink-lacquered nails. "Father was so lonely after Mother's death—I couldn't leave him until he got over the shock. I always think time helps so much, don't you?" She made a wistful little gesture, all resignation and sweet courage, and smiled. "But why talk of poor little me? Tell me what you've been doing. Of course I've read every word I could find in the papers, but I'd so much rather hear about it from you."

Was she like this, thought John. How did I know? I was in love, I did not think, she is like this or that— Today, as he had looked about the campus, he had seen, not the familiar buildings, but himself, blown on the wind

of compulsion he could not resist, to loiter along a path, outside an entrance, where he knew that presently Adelaide would appear, never alone, always with someone, incredibly gay, light-hearted, easy. He would pretend not to see them, stalking along with hands in pockets, head down, his air intended to suggest that he was absorbed in matters of great importance. But the sound of her voice would draw his heart out in a thin thread of longing, and a glimpse of her, the way she shook back the fine soft cloud of hair, the way her body moved, that eager, swinging rhythm, the full, sweet-sensuous mouth, the confident dark eyes, such a glimpse sent his heart leaping, tugging, like a child's kite flown from a gusty hilltop on too short a line. Sometimes she nodded to him, and he would think, tomorrow, if she should come out alone, I will speak to her, I will say, "Do you mind if I walk along with you?" But they intimidated him, all the light-hearted cohorts that surrounded her, and for all he practiced speeches, shutting his door at home, keeping his voice low so that his mother wouldn't overhear, he was dumb when he saw her. Nor was she ever alone. He recognized with bitterness the young men who walked beside her, one or another of the college heroes. But she had seen him watching her, her nod had changed, it was a recognition, there you are again! And in the spring, when the President had given his annual reception to the senior class, and John had gone— (Of course you must go, his mother had said. It's time you had some social life.) He had gone, in a torment of self-consciousness which kept his palms and forehead icy-damp. Adelaide, incredibly lovely in rose-colored silk, had found him in a corner, where he had been watching the entrance, waiting for a moment when President Hollister and the rest of the reception line seemed occupied enough so that he could escape. "You don't like parties, do you?"

she had laughed, and reached for his hand, her thumb and forefinger curling warm around his thumb, shaking it. "Come along, there's swell food in the next room. You know, we've met so often I feel as if I knew you. Had you noticed that?" John didn't remember what he had answered; none of the clever speeches he had prepared. "Call me up some day," Adelaide had said. "Call me up, let's do something."

He had called her house twice, but she was out. And then she had called him, the last week of college. "I thought you were going to call me, but since you haven't—" She had asked him to take her to the Senior dance. Instantly the recollection of that night immersed him. He had thought he had outlived it, forgotten it; he had, actually, not thought of it for years, and all the time it waited, unaltered, undiminished. But it did not take him away from the present, as if he had walked back through the years, it rose within the present, so that he still looked at Adelaide, he knew he must speak in answer to her question, and yet he was the boy who danced with her in the old armory, her fragrance in his nostrils, ecstasy making him oblivious to his own ineptness, his awkwardness. He had spent so many dreams with her that now, holding her, watching for her lashes to lift, for her eyes to meet his, he had the illusion that she had come to love him, that she had seen the smoke rising from his secret altars, and accepted him. He could not distinguish what he had said from what he thought no longer had need of words between them. Men from the stag line had tapped his shoulder, wresting her away, and he had not lived until he claimed her again. He must have told her about his father's factory. "He's always wanted me to go in with him. I meant to go away, to study, but I won't. We can get married right away." For he could hear her voice. "My

heavens, when you do talk, you work fast! But you can't stand still in the middle of the floor!" And then a derisive male voice, "What's the matter, all worn out?" And Adelaide, "You! I thought you weren't coming to this dance!" John had stood there, watching her whirl off, the figure of the man was vague, competent, agile, broad-shouldered. Someone had bumped against him, he had blundered to the edge of the floor. He had hovered there, braced against the scuff of feet, the flare of saxophones, ready to plunge into the turning figures, to have Adelaide back again. But the music screamed and stopped, he had not seen her, nor could he find her. He had posted himself at the wide doorway, where couples came strolling in from the June darkness, so that she could see him. His ecstasy sharpened into panic: something must have happened to her! Or was she waiting somewhere, and he, baffled and appalled now that she was gone, did not know where she would expect him to come? The minutes were distended as in a nightmare, he was frozen with indecision to his post at the doorway. Another dance, a waltz; then another. As the couples drifted past him, a girl turned. "I think somebody ought to tell him," he heard her say, and the boy with her laughed. "Adelaide's gone, in case you're interested," she said, fliply. "She went off with Milton, in his car. They'd had a big bust-up, you see, and when he showed up tonight, she—" The rafters under the pointed roof had swayed in and out with laughter, the streamers of gay bunting had run in ripples. He must have said something, for the girl had given him a startled look, and gone.

Adelaide stepped closer to him, a step that carried her across years. "Have I changed so much?" she said, and her upward glance was like an imitation of his memory. "Or

are you so rich and famous now you can't bother to answer my question?"

"I'm sorry. What did you ask me?"

"It doesn't matter. John, what were you thinking about, as you stared at me?" She was very near him now, the scent she wore was not the same, her breath was quick, the fine silken hairs of the silver fox trembling over her breast. "I had this vivid picture of you—you were so sweet—innocent and shy. You took me to a party, do you remember? Only something went wrong—I can't remember just what happened, only I know you disappeared, and I had to go home with another boy. But I've thought so often, as I've watched your marvelous success—it must have been an instinct, don't you think? I mean I had to let you go, I couldn't hold you here. Like tying down an eagle. I think women have an instinct like that. If they are brave enough—" Her hand rested an instant against his arm, her upturned eyes, the quiver of her mouth were sacrificial.

(My God, does she believe it? Alarm blew a cold puff at the base of John's neck, prickled in his scalp.)

"When I hear these wonderful things, I say—oh, just to myself!—but for me, the world might never have known you."

John retreated, his mouth forming a protest still unuttered.

"Oh, I don't expect any credit!" Adelaide's voice sharpened. "But you certainly would have stayed right here and gone into your father's business—" Voices sounded in the outer office, Adelaide stiffened, and then in a swift, cajoling undertone, "You didn't realize how I felt. No man ever does, about a woman, you must believe it now. Father has something—a surprise—I wanted you to know—before you answered him." She turned, her face

animated, her laugh tinkling, as Dr. Hollister came in, his robes rustling.

"I'll run along," she said. "We've just been reminiscing—I'll wait in the car, while you two have your little talk."

Dr. Hollister removed his mortar-board, and patted his forehead. Things had gone off very well, an occasion for mutual congratulation, the papers would devote a good deal of space to the story, it would help in the next campaign for a new administration building. He sat behind his desk, John sat beside him, trying to listen, hearing again what Adelaide had said. Like a negative, he thought, with every value reversed. Woman's instinct, good God, his instinct was all for escape, now, before this fantasia settled around him, and he was lost.

"I don't know whether you would consider it," Hollister was saying. He was not wholly at ease, having difficulty in setting just the tone he wished, one which admitted John's achievement and still kept him as a product of Hollister's college. "But you are still a young man, you have made no university connections, they would be of mutual benefit. Time for your own work, of course, and also the valuable discipline of co-operation, of service."

"I have refused some offers," said John, mildly.

"No doubt, no doubt. But don't give me your answer at once. Think it over. You are younger than any man to whom we have made such an offer. But Porter is retiring, and it's peculiarly fitting—your own college, your own building. If I may say so, I think life here in the Middle West has a vitality, a richness which a place like New York has lost. Our salaries aren't large, but you have so many avenues—"

John rose abruptly.

"Here, we'll run you home." Dr. Hollister stood up, unfastening his robe, trotting across to the bookshelves,

swinging back a section to disclose the discreetly private president's lavatory.

"Thank you, I'll walk." John drew a long breath. "I have another long train trip tonight, you know."

The hanger clattered on the hook as Hollister hung away his robe. "But Adelaide's waiting for us," he said, with a brisk air of you-know-how-women-are! "She's disappointed that you won't dine with us. Of course your family wants you, but you should give old friends a moment or two." He swung the shelves back into place, and faced John. He had put away his office with his gown, he was genial now, perhaps slightly arch. "She can tell you better than I can about our town, the kind of life you could make for yourself here. I think, if I may say so as an older man, that you need to come out of your laboratory, down from your ivory tower."

At his words anger reared in John Henderson, strong charger, striking fire with plunging hoofs, the secret, vital anger which would brook no control, no interference, the part of him which carried him to swift safety remote from the confusion which other human beings spread about him. Stubbornness, they had called it when he was a little boy. You can't tell John anything.

"That would be for me to decide," he said, in a shout, and was gone, striding through the offices before Hollister, his smooth face frog-like in amazement, had time for any answer.

Still riding his sudden rage, he struck off across the campus, his feet automatically taking the short cut home they had known so well, between chapel and gymnasium, past the old physics building, down an alley. The crowd had for the most part gone; he walked oblivious to the occasional curious glance which followed him. The alley emerged between garages and kitchen gardens of brick

houses into a narrow park, edged with a row of houses, wide-lawned, the elms along the drive holding a russet haze where their branches arched against the soft blue of the sky. Faculty Row, they called it, although the faculty had moved away, out to the subdivision beyond the town. John stopped, staring down the parkway, and suddenly he laughed. Had they picked out the house in which he should live? His anger had gone now, and he went on slowly, a hand in his pocket, his head down. Like holding up a negative, trying to guess at the picture, his attempt to think over again what Adelaide had said. Suppose it was true, and he had made his misery out of his awkward inexperience. He had left town that next day, he had gone east, how could she have told him?

But I no longer want her, he thought, and the words were a cold wind blown over emptiness. He had needed love, he had made an image and called it by her name, it had never existed.

But because he had loved her, she could make use of him. And now that he no longer loved her, she might see a thousand uses, she could not hold him to one of them. You don't fall out of love, he thought, the way you fall in. You crawl out of it so slowly that you do not know you have moved. For Adelaide had not changed; she was the same bright, polished shell, a little more burnished, perhaps, a trifle harder. Perhaps this emptiness he felt had existed for a long time, and he had refused to look into it. He had taken work as a drug to obliterate his suffering, like other addicts he had increased the dose— Maybe I needed a hopeless love to get me started, he thought, and laughed. I had to come back before I was free. I owe her that, at least; she didn't want me, she didn't hold me here. He would have stayed, if she had wished. Stayed, and what then? He tried to see the life he might have

led, here in the little town. A life like his father's. It had been a good life for his father, one he had made for himself. And I, thought John, should never have known why I hated it. I would have blamed myself, as I did when I grew up here, that I was a misfit, that I hated the way the edges of life were tucked in so neat and close around me, that I envied and hated the contented, easy, masterful ones, so sure that what they knew and had was all that was good. I had to get away to learn that there were other men like me, to find a place where I wasn't so awkwardly, so damnably outside. He had to fall in love, the dark and secret pressure of his maturing body had driven him, the bright and secret pressure of his dreams had driven him. Perhaps his own future had protected him, choosing Adelaide. He had never thought that she would love him, there had been no surprise in his pain. Perhaps again his future, ready for the next stage, had brought him back for this disclosure, this clearing away the past.

He thought how curiously triumph flattened as you reached it, like the summit of a great hill seen first from a distance, diminishing imperceptibly beneath your climbing feet, until at the crest there is no height. His gift toward the new building had not been a gesture of triumph; he had thought there as well as anywhere men may appear—if you let them see what has been done, what minute, pitiful crumbs we have as yet broken from all that we must know.

He had not known quite why he had been impelled to come when Hollister beckoned. He was engrossed in the final stages of an experiment, he loathed crowds and speeches and interruption. He had written that he could not come, and then wired that he would. A hangover of youth, of the day-dream which had been part of the drive

which had carried him away from the town. He had forgotten the dream, it had been overlaid by his absorption in his work. A boy's dream, in which he returned with trumpets and plumes to confound the people who had not noticed when he passed. *When I come back, you'll see!* You will say, is that the boy we knew? That queer fellow, that misfit, clumsy, ridiculous, unnoticed? Will you have the chair of physics, Dr. Henderson? You must come out of your ivory tower, did you know I had been waiting for you? Here in his hand, his child's dream, and he no longer wished it. For what he had done meant nothing to them. (Our mutual advantage, Hollister had said.) They gave lip service to the outer evidence of renown, past that no interest moved. You are so rich and famous, Adelaide had said. It did not matter how. Perhaps some boy whom he would never know, had listened, felt a tug at his imagination, felt the challenge in this great wall of the unknown which hemmed men in. Life was so short, men's hands grew unsteady, their eyes dimmed, their minds fogged over, before they had time to chip away a fragment from the wall.

That was what mattered, that excitement, strong of wing and infinitely patient, which hovered endlessly, through days, months, waiting the moment when the smallest fragment of truth had been exposed. The extraordinary thing was that so many men were unaware of mystery, were content just to be alive, not to discover. How could they know what he, John Henderson, was about? But scattered through the world were men like him, who understood. They understood, too, what John knew, that his renown was accidental, that he shared it with all of them. Chance, in the timing of his results, in the way they dovetailed with the work of other men. For it was extraordinary how often a dozen of them, working separately, alone,

came almost at the same moment upon the same conclusion, some further proven theory. Huxson, sending John the manuscript of his book, the week after John's had been published, with a note, "You'll get the credit, by this narrow margin, but I did the work, too." When they met, Huxson had no bitterness. He had said, "You know, I believe these things have to come out now, no matter through whose labor. We're at the most important threshold since brains began, we've got a technique, we've got apparatus, we're on the track— God, I'd like to live a thousand years! You know what I think? I think the world, the universe, the forces that run us, God Himself, are sick of men's ignorance, I think they mean to be disclosed." He had been embarrassed after his outburst, and had gone away, his long arms dangling from his rounded shoulders. When the prize was awarded, John had thought, this should be Huxson's, too, and how many other men's?

He stopped at a corner. There, in the next block, stood the family house, the grounds smaller than he remembered, the house not shabby, exactly, but resigned, the paint dull, the spring light harsh, unsoftened by the summer growth into which the house would later retreat. They were waiting for him, his father and mother, all the relatives. They would think he had been crazy to give away the money for a physics building. They couldn't see that it mattered whether an atom could be smashed or not! He laughed, and walked on slowly. These relatives always gave him a certain uneasiness. They were strangers, and yet they took on in words or actions the impertinence of intimacy. His affection for his mother and father, chiefly for his father, had a strong element of resistance, as if he felt them trying to collect a debt which he had never willingly contracted. I'll tell them about Hollister's offer, he thought. That will please them, or will they wish me to

take it? Settle here, marry, raise a family, be a good son. He stood a moment at the door, reluctant to enter. Something strange in homecoming. You let yourself slide back into the pool in which the first stage of your life had been spent, before you developed legs and lungs and hopped away— He could hear voices within, indistinct and continuous. That sounded like his grandfather's bellow. John thrust finger and thumb into a pocket, he'd forgotten to glance at the note the old fellow had poked at him, he must have dropped it. John had had a letter from him, offering to invest his money. He was surprised to see him in the family picture, he'd disappeared in the dust of notoriety the last year John was in college. Here goes, thought John, turning the doorknob, knowing that when he entered the house he would leave behind him much that he had become. He hoped—(little boy, trotting beside his father, hand engulfed in the warm, firm fingers of the man; older boy, head not quite to the man's shoulder, shrinking from the glare of the furnaces, the clatter of the great roaring presses; go over the plant with me, I'd like to show it to you—) he hoped his father would be pleased.

VIII

Eliza sat back in her chair, her old hands folded under the curtain of the long damask cloth, and looked about the table; she was tired, the skin drew tight over her forehead, her mouth made a firm, down-turned crescent. No one was paying any attention to her, she could feel as tired as she chose. Tom, at her right, had been gallant enough at the beginning of the supper, piling her plate with salad and rolls and cold meat, making little wisecracks, and Will, at her left, had told her a long story about the farm. But Tom had fallen into silence, his face flushed (she hoped

he hadn't had too much to drink!) and Will, after trying to draw more than a monosyllable from Mary Davies, who sat next (she doesn't like it, sitting there with all the Hendersons, thought Eliza, she's not eating a crumb!), was talking past her loudly to Nelson. Eliza heard his voice boom, without listening to his words, she heard Nelson's mother, just opposite Will, give her hearty laugh, approving of Will's humor. Nelson was pretty quiet, not that he ever was hearty. He kept looking down the table, as if he watched Margaret for some cue, as if he didn't wish to miss one of his son's infrequent low words. Paul Davies had given up his attempt to establish a flirtatious rapport with Gertrude (her genuine interest in food was discouraging!), and sat back in his chair, his eyes restless, a reflective forefinger against his mouth. (He wants to look thoughtful! Eliza knew. But he was just waiting a moment to explode into something.) The woman who was helping Margaret came in from the kitchen, her round face flushed and earnest, her crisp white cotton uniform crackling as she moved around the table, breathing in puffs. "Don't get up, Mother Henderson," said Margaret. "Please. Mrs. Kupfer can take care of things," and Mrs. Kupfer said, "Sure, just leave me time."

"Mother's in a rush for her dessert," said Will, and Mother Henderson said, "In a rush to get it for you, you mean."

Eliza felt in her bag for the smooth cool surface of the small bottle which held her charcoal tablets. She had a long ride ahead of her. She thought, I won't come again, it's too far, if anybody wants to see me they can do the traveling. I'm too old for any more family gatherings. My spine feels unbuttoned, I'd like to lie down in my own bed. I wanted to see John Henderson, I haven't had a chance at a

word with him, in an hour now he'll be gone. I wanted to say, don't let anything stop you, you're the first.

The telephone rang, and Gertrude pushed back her chair. "That's the children," she said, sliding out with surprising quickness. "I told them they could call me up." She hurried away with lively taps of her heels.

"It costs twenty-five cents," said Mrs. Henderson.

"But you know how Gertie is, when they're out of her sight." Will grinned at her.

Paul Davies, with the space between him and John thus emptied, pounced suddenly upon his grandson. "I was sorry you didn't see fit to use my notes in your speech," he said, and his words had a quivering rush. "It seemed appropriate to mention the Davies name. It has a part in your achievement."

"I—was that what your note was?" John blinked a little, his voice was mild.

"Didn't you read it?" Paul brought a fist down on the table, rocking his coffee cup in the saucer.

"Father!" Margaret's face was pale, her hand moved toward that truculent fist. "Don't go upsetting things!" Her light syllables danced on a taut thread. Eliza thought, it's coming, I knew it would. Mrs. Henderson leaned forward, her full bosom pressing against the table, her head cocked incredulously toward Paul, the crinkles of her face smoothing out in a ruddy glow.

"Davies," she said. "Davies, indeed! The least said the better, I'd say!"

Then Gertrude was at the doorway. "It's for you, John," she said. "Some woman. Not the children. I hope nothing's wrong—" She slipped into her chair, hitching it forward, as John rose.

"Now don't start fussing, Gertie." Will spoke automatically, in response to her glance. "Who's calling up

John? He leave a girl behind him when he went away?"

(No use, Will, you can't sidetrack them.) Eliza felt the quick, galvanic movement which the taunt had stirred in Tom, so that he lunged upward in his chair; down the table Mary Davies leaned forward, her eyes hard, the cords under her chin drawn taut. Mrs. Henderson jiggled her head in defiance, gray hair flying out in wisps from the tight knot. Mrs. Kupfer entered, the sound of her flat house shoes a noisy scuff in the strained silence. She set the platter of ice cream before Margaret, she brought the plates of frosted cakes from the buffet. Gertrude said, "I'd know Mamma's devil's food anywhere!"

Margaret cut the ice cream, her knife clicking on the platter, her hand not steady as she lifted slices to the plates. When Mrs. Kupfer had vanished into the kitchen, she said, a sighing breath tangled in her words, "John will be gone in an hour, please—"

"That's all right, Margaret." Tom spoke with careful distinctness. "Some remarks need some explanation. You can't just lie back and take everything, can you? What they say in the West is, 'Damn you, when you say that, smile!'"

"My gracious, what's going on?" Gertrude stared at Tom, her round blue eyes disapproving.

"Pipe down," said Nelson, laying his square hand firmly over his mother's. "As Margie says, it's John's day."

"John Henderson," said his mother, irrepressibly.

"And none of the rest of us matter at all, I suppose," said Tom.

"No, we don't!" Eliza hooked her fingers about Tom's wrist, she felt the stubborn resistance in his muscles. "That's what ails all of us. We don't matter, not one whit. John's the first one, Davies and Stevenses and Hendersons. It's taken the Lord a long, hard time to get him made.

All the waste, all the heart-break, and at last one man who's big enough to care about something more than himself! And you start yapping among yourselves." Tears blurred their startled faces before her angry, blazing eyes, anger chiseled age and weariness from her face, leaving it spare and harsh, strong-boned. She had it clear at last, the answer for which she had hungered most of her long life. This was what it was all about, the suffering, the failures, the waste, most of all the dreadful waste. By-products, scrapped, as life ground out one of its few, rare, useful—well, say it—*great* men! "It's come over me lately that I couldn't bear it, the way everything petered out, a kind of dry rot set in. Look at our people! They couldn't be decent, ordinary human beings. Gifts they wouldn't use, power that never got hitched to anything! And all the things waiting for men to do. But John's found his way, he's hitched to real work. I suppose every great man the world ever knew had a batch of relatives that didn't amount to much. It takes a lot of experimenting to get a prize winner in any breed. John will be gone in a few minutes, and the rest of you will go your ways just as you always have. But I—" Eliza huddled back in her chair; her heart beat so slowly there was a long loop of peace between the faint strokes, and the faces about the table receded pleasantly. Her lips moved, but she was talking only to herself, now. That's what counts, she thought she said; once in a long while you get the right combination, that's what life's up to, getting men who have powers and use them. The rest doesn't count.

"She can talk about her own folks like that if she wants to," spoke up Mrs. Henderson. "We never had anything to be ashamed of."

"No, nor proud of, either!" Paul Davies glowered at her.

"You—you were talking about me!" Tom had turned in his chair toward Eliza, one arm over the chair-back, his eyelids flushed, a forefinger shaking at Eliza. "I thought you were my friend, and you— Why, damn it, you know all I need is a break! Give me a break and I'll show you what I can do!"

"Of course we all know John is smart," said Gertrude, firmly, her fair face quite pink. "I'd just as soon my children weren't so smart, and I must say Will works hard enough for anybody."

"Bringing up the past like that"—Mary Davies gave a little gasp—"when we're all trying so hard—"

Eliza lifted her heavy eyelids. They had heard, each of them, only a piece of what she tried to say, the piece each chose to take. They were furious at her for a meddling old fool. Margaret would be cross because her supper was spoiled. But Margaret was leaning forward, looking across the table at Nelson, lifting her hand a little, palm up, fingers curled; emotion moved like light over her face, like a wash of youth.

"It's true," she said, and Eliza turned her eyes slowly, to look at Nelson. His ruddiness had paled, his sandy brows drew down over his troubled eyes. "It's true, what Eliza said. All the waste—all the heartbreak, and now, John. John Henderson. Your son."

There it was, thought Eliza. Strength. The word went off with sparks in her head. Strength. Margaret was saying it, her way. Margaret had heard her.

"I'm tired," said Eliza, abruptly. Nothing but sparks flying in her head. She pushed her chair back, leaning heavily on the table as she got to her feet. "I'm going to lie down." She shook off Tom's hand, as he moved to help her. "I don't need anybody to lean on." John was coming back, she heard him in the hall. "Here he is," she said,

and knew how they all moved in a chorus of adjustment, shaking her off, smoothing down the surface. At the doorway she met John. "You have a look about you of my father," she said, slowly. "He'd of liked to talk with you. You could have put him on the right track."

IX

For a moment, as Eliza spoke, Margaret had felt herself shrink into the tiniest pin-point of consciousness, a drop of sand in the hour-glass through which the generations sifted, part of the way life went about its business. Almost she was a part of the flash of wisdom in Eliza's old head. She could not endure that shrinking long; she was not old enough. She drew a long breath, Nelson was watching her, his forehead creased, his eyes uncertain. Margaret turned to look at her son, and now, at the end of the day, clear delight ran through her. Her anxieties had all been foolishness. Whatever happened here did not affect John. This was his past, out of which he had already moved. From his father he had drawn tenacity, faith that the work a man set his hand to—or his head—was worth the doing. With that he made his own future.

"I'm sorry they kept me so long," he said. "I'm afraid I'll have to start, I don't want to miss that train."

"Tell us who the gal was!" sang out Will Wagner, and Gertrude laughed.

"The gal?" John's eyes were humorous, meeting his mother's. "Just the Hollisters. They were urging me to stay over. But I can't."

"We'll drive you to the station, just your mother and me." Nelson came around the table with a quiet determination, ignoring the sudden jump which Margaret's father

made, the round-eyed injury on his mother's face. "We haven't had a minute of you."

Margaret stood at the outer door, a coat over her arm. John had shaken hands, he had bent for his grandmothers to kiss him, he hurried under his restrained movement, he said phrases over, as if, not knowing quite what to say, he could only echo his own words. Margaret's mother was crying into a lace-bordered handkerchief; Paul Davies, having given his grandson a magnanimous farewell, posted himself beside her, and drew one of her hands through the crook of his elbow. After one startled glance, Mary Davies let her fingers relax against his sleeve. She's so put out with Eliza, thought Margaret; if she can find any comfort in him—

"Ready, Margie?" Nelson had John's suitcase in one hand, the key-chain dangled over his forefinger, the keys clinking. "Don't forget your Aunt Eliza," he said, as John stepped into the hall. "She's lying down, in the living room."

He and Margaret stood in front of the house, waiting. "Don't mind," Nelson cleared his throat, "if your aunt did sort of bust out. She's pretty old, she's had a lot to put up with. Maybe there was something in what she said, but I don't know as it did any harm." Margaret could see him lift his head; above the thin branches of the maples showed a few stars, dim, diffused in the soft spring night. "It was nice, what you said." John was in the doorway behind them, his long shadow leaned across Nelson's shoulders. "John *Henderson*."

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



136 441

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY